



PHOTO: CARLETON BAILE



A Delta II rocket carrying a Navstar GPS satellite lifts off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.



Nathan Lewis

SATELLITE-ASSISTED HIDE AND SEEK

A new genre of treasure hunters puts Chattanooga on their map

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The numbers drop abruptly as Nathan Lewis crosses the parking lot: 265, 260, 240 ...

"It's getting close," says the 22-year-old Collegedale resident and Southern Adventist University student; 54, 53, 52 ...

As he crosses the asphalt in front of SAU's Thatcher Hall, numbers on his GPS continue to decrease, reflecting his close proximity to pre-programmed coordinates, and the hidden treasure. Nearing a sundial sculpture near the school's busy traffic circle, Lewis' device beeps, signifying he is now within a few feet; 16, 14, 12 ...

"I'll get to the spot where my GPS says

zero and I'll stop and ask 'Where would I hide it if I were a geocacher?'" he says.

More and more people are asking themselves similar questions. Approximately five million people in the U.S. have taken up geocaching, a hobby where people hide capsules of knickknacks and log the so called "caches" coordinates on a website for others to find. The game marries old-fashioned treasure hunting with high-tech GPS technology and satellite coordinates.

For the growing number of local enthusiasts, a 90-day traveling museum exhibit highlighting geocaching will begin

during May at the Adventure Science Center in Nashville. "It's been growing really quickly," says Jen Sonstelie, marketing manager for geocaching.com. New geocaching apps for smart phones are attracting many new users, she notes.

Approximately 1.2 million caches are estimated worldwide, including hundreds in the Chattanooga area. Lewis has found many of the local stashes, claiming more than 5,300 finds in total. Tucked behind the sundial near Thatcher Hall, he locates a six-inch plastic tube with a log book inside. All of the enthusiasts who have found the cache since it was hidden in

2004 have signed the book. Lewis, whose nickname is Super Nate on geocaching websites, recognizes his signature on the log, having left it years ago.

Chattanooga, a favorite

"Chattanooga has a lot of caches – I mean a ton," explains Lewis, who has found a variety of treasures in 29 states and says he is determined to add the remaining 21. The density of caches in Chattanooga leads some geocachers to call the city Cache-anooga, he says.

"You probably walk by at least one downtown every day without knowing it," adds Chattanooga resident Misty Moon, 31. She says one of her favorites is hidden near the TVA building downtown.

Unlike baseball, where historians for more than a century have been debating whether Abner Doubleday actually founded the game, geocachers know exactly when their favorite pastime began. Only a day earlier, satellite-based global positioning technology became accessible to civilians; then on May 3, 2000, David Ulmer, a Portland, Ore., native hid a bucket out in the woods and posted the coordinates on an online discussion board.

"Within 48 hours, two people had gone out and found what he hid," says Sonsteli.

And thus a sport was born. By September, 2000, there were 75 active caches, and by December 31, 2007, there were 500,000. The number doubled to 1 million during March, 2010.

Travel bugs

Variations abound. Some enthusiasts hide "travel bugs," which Sonsteli describes as pieces of a game within a game. Bugs range from coins to stuffed animals, each with a targeted destination. A local cacher, for example, might conceal a travel bug in California asking for its return to



Lewis and a "find"

Tennessee. Cachers can track progress through a website as different cachers try to move the bugs closer to their intended destination. "It's interesting to see how far things like that travel," says Moon.

After finding his sundial cache, Super Nate says he headed for a "travel bug hotel," a cache off of a wooded trail on Lookout Mountain. From inside a hollow stump, he retrieved a gallon jug tucked away and covered in cam-

ouflage duct tape. Inside he pulled out a handful of coins and other travel bugs.

Among its treasure Lewis found a pirate's "Piece of 8" coin containing a skull and crossbones. According to the geocaching website, the coin was first hidden in Alaska, and has been hidden in Arizona and Utah on its way back to an owner in Southwest Louisiana. "Any mile that it gets towards Southwest Louisiana is closer to its goal," says Lewis,



The tools of a geocacher

who plans to drop the coin at a cache in Alabama.

Big and small caches

Caches range from the size of a pencil eraser to 55-gallon drums. Some require climbing, caving or scuba gear. Fake sprinkler heads, irrigation boxes and phony electric boxes are favorite hiding spots for experienced cachers. Lewis says he can't always find a cache on his first try. One stumped him three times, he says, before he realized the log was rolled up tightly and stuffed in a hollowed pine cone. "Some people get really creative with their caches," says Moon.

Moon got into geocaching with her husband, Shay. Avid hikers, the couple wanted to add an extra wrinkle to their favorite pastime. "I think it was an excuse to buy another gadget," she laughs. While top-of-the-line GPS devices can cost more than \$1,000, most cachers opt for \$100 or \$200 models.

While seeking cached treasures, the Moons have stumbled upon new hiking trails. Misty says she loves spending time outdoors with her husband, and enjoys the thrill each time they find a cache. "It goes back to childhood treasure hunting," she says.

As the days get longer, cachers like Lewis have more light and better weather to find their targets. During an unseasonably warm weekend in January, Lewis and friends found more than 300 caches in one day near Columbia, Tenn. "Geocaching for me is much more enjoyable in the warmer weather," he says. But like everything, there are tradeoffs. With warmer weather comes poison ivy, thunderstorms and snakes. "Many geocache hunts have been cut short or canceled because of severe thunderstorms," he adds. "Torrential downpours do not slow me down much, but lightning does." ♦