

Introduction to Geocaching in Alaska

compiled by NorthWes (aka Wes Skinner)



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1. Why Geocache?

There are as many reasons as cachers – some love the adventure of a ‘treasure hunt’, others enjoy the extra sense of purpose the cache hunt brings to a walk, or the good times afield with friends and/or family chasing down the hide. Many geocachers especially enjoy the journey crafted by the cache owner – a trip to a hidden scenic vista or little-known park that you’d otherwise never discover without the cache that brings you to the location. *All* reasons involve enjoying the out of doors. There are many ways to ‘play’ the game of geocaching, and as long as they fit within the ethicals of the sport they’re just fine the way you choose to play them. Most of all – have fun!

2. Who is GeocacheAlaska! Inc?

GeocacheAlaska! Inc. is an alliance of Alaskan cachers serving as a local point of contact for land managers (such as the Municipality of Anchorage’s Parks and Recreation Dept, Alaska State Parks, the BLM, etc.). We host training events, CITO (cache in – trash out) Events and other geocaching activities. Our website at geocachealaska.org is a central source of information on caching in Alaska, including links to regional coordinators for the organization across the entire state.

The purposes of GeocacheAlaska! are to:

- Promote geocaching as an exciting, family-oriented activity that increases awareness of parks and trail systems.
- Provide opportunities for the geocaching community to enjoy geocaching in the area and to meet and socialize with like-minded geocachers.
- Increase awareness of geocaching issues in the area through interaction with other outdoor activity groups, geocaching clubs, and the public.
- Educate geocachers on low impact geocaching and promote stewardship of our natural resources.
- Educate other outdoor enthusiasts on geocaching.
- Represent geocaching interests in public forums and to recreation land managers.
- Actively promote the "Cache In Trash Out" (CITO) program to help in the maintenance of parks and trail systems.

3. Basic Gear:

Ask 100 different geocachers what equipment you need to hunt a cache and you'll get 100 different answers. That's because the equipment you use will vary depending on the kind of cache you're seeking, the kind of terrain you're on, the season of the year, the amount of caching you plan on doing and other factors. This is a general 'short list' you'll modify as you learn...

GPS – The GPS receiver should be portable, easy to use and read, and affordable! You can always upgrade later if you find the game has become an obsession... There are two major manufacturers: Garmin - <http://www.garmin.com/> - makers of the popular e-Trex, Gekko, and Rhino series units; Magellan - <http://www.magellangps.com/en/> - makers of the eXplorist and Meridian series units. DeLorme - <http://www.delorme.com/> - has also entered the geocaching GPS market with their PN series of handheld units.

Prices range from under \$100 to over \$800 for just the unit without accessories. The biggest differences are in memory (and data transfer methods), map features, and antennas. The 'patch' antenna in the smaller eTrex units isn't as accurate in tight cover as the 'quadrahelix' antenna projecting above Map60 or 76 units, but it helps the GPS be smaller for stealth.

Compass / Map – carry them, learn how to use them! Don't rely on the GPS only for travel!

Cache Bag – a place for trade items, spare batteries, gloves/hat, sunblock, mosquito headnet, spare socks, snacks, digital camera, water bottle, CITO trash bag, small first aid kit... and whatever else your experiences lead you to bring along in the out of doors.

4. Ethics of the Game

One of the chief joys of geocaching is its inherent flexibility for the individual player – YOU!

However, there are guidelines and ethics beyond what's *required* for using the geocaching.com website. These are self-motivated principles which not only make the game more enjoyable for all concerned – they also enhance the public's positive perception of geocaching in general.

○ **The Geocacher's Creed – 'Safe • Legal • Ethical'**

When placing or seeking geocaches, I will:

- 1. Not endanger myself or others*
- 2. Observe all laws & rules of the area*
- 3. Respect property rights and seek permission where appropriate*
- 4. Avoid causing disruptions or public alarm*
- 5. Minimize my and others' impact on the environment*
- 6. Be considerate of others*
- 7. Protect the integrity of the game pieces*

Learn more about the Geocacher's Creed at www.geocreed.info

○ **CITO – Cache In Trash Out – *Let’s clean up our playing fields!***

Cache In Trash Out is an activity intimately tied to geocaching. While out there on a cache hunt, we collect litter along the trails and properly dispose of it. On certain days, we also participate in much larger clean-up events that involve and benefit the larger community. It only takes a few to make a huge impact on the litter problem we face in our parks and on our trails... make a difference – pack trash out on the way back from your cache find, and make your community a cleaner place to live. Learn more about CITO at www.cacheintrashout.org

○ **Tread Lightly! – *Leaving a good impression***

Tread Lightly! offers specific ways to minimize impact when four-wheeling, off-highway motorcycling, mountain biking, geocaching, riding an ATV, hunting with an ATV, snowmobiling, camping, fishing, boating, hunting, horseback riding, backcountry skiing, hiking, sand duning and using a personal watercraft. Read more at www.treadlightly.org

○ **Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics**

The program strives to educate all those who enjoy the outdoors about the nature of their recreational impacts as well as techniques to prevent and minimize such impacts. Leave No Trace is best understood as an educational and ethical program, not as a set of rules and regulations. Learn more at www.lnt.org

○ **Trade Even or Trade Up**

This is the principle of trading something of equal or greater value for what you take from a cache. It promotes keeping the ‘treasure hunt’ aspect of the game a rich experience to enjoy.

5. BASICS OF THE HUNT...7 EASY STEPS

Step 1: Set up your geocaching.com account

Step 2: Pick out your first cache to hunt

Step 3: Get coordinates into your GPS

Step 4: Get to the cache

Step 5: The search

Step 6: The find

Step 7: Log your find online

Step 1: Setting Up Your Geocaching.com Account

On the left side of any page on geocaching.com you'll find a link named "My Account." Click here and then click the "Create a new account" link.

NOTE: While anyone can view a cache page simply by going to Geocaching.com, you cannot view the actual coordinates for the cache without signing up for an account with the website. This is a precaution to help prevent cache theft and other malicious intent. Basic accounts are free, so this won't cost you anything. You may wish to become a premium member, which comes with a few extra perks, but for now a basic membership is all you will need. Geocaching.com does not sell information from its listings – it has a very strict privacy policy.

First Page: Basic account information - First name and last name, Email address, Pick a username to use with this account, Enter a password, Click "Create my account";

Second Page: "Where in the world are you?" (optional info, but very very useful)
Enter Your Country/State?/ Address and Address (continued)/ City/ Postal Code,

Default Timezone (Alaska!), Preferred Units (Imperial, unless you like metric), and your home coordinates, then Click "Update my location info"

Third Page: "Who are You?" (optional info, but very very useful)

Occupation/Location/Bio-hobbies-recent news, and selections for forum posting

(**Geocaching.com forums** - an online community of geocachers who share great ideas & a lot of silliness)

Click the "Save my Profile Details" button and then check for your "Validation Instructions" email from Geocaching.com. Follow the instructions in the email and your account setup is complete!

Step 2: Picking out your first cache to hunt:

Go to Geocaching.com, log in (from top right of page), click on 'MY ACCOUNT' (left column), then click on '*Search for nearest caches from your home coordinates*' in the 'Search Options' box on the upper right side of the page. A list of caches nearest your home will appear, ranked by distance from closest to furthest away. A series of symbols to the left of the cache name shows the type of cache, the presence of a travel bug or geocoin, difficulty and terrain rating, and the date of listing.

Generally, for a first-time cache hunt you'll want to choose a 'traditional' full-sized cache rated below 2 stars for both 'difficulty' and 'terrain'. It's simpler to find a large container on your first outing rather than a tiny magnetic capsule typical of a microcache. Choose an area you've visited before to improve your odds – or, strike out in a totally new direction!

Use the maps available by clicking on the cache web page map options to scout your approach to the cache area (in preparation for step #4 – getting to the cache).

Step 3: Getting coordinates into your GPS

A basic GPS receiver will allow you to mark a waypoint by entering a name or identifier for the waypoint (such as "HOME," "WORK," "CACHE," etc.) and enter the longitude and latitude coordinates for the waypoint. On the basic yellow Garmin eTrex, go to the main menu and choose "MARK" from the list of options. Once "MARK" is highlighted, push the "ENTER" button (on the bottom left of the unit) to select it.

On the more advanced eTrex units, pushing in on the "Click Stick" controller will mark a waypoint. On the Magellan eXplorist GPS, you simply push the "Mark" button, located at the bottom left of the unit and identified with a pushpin icon.

Once you're on the "Mark" screen, you need to give the waypoint a name. GPS's usually default to a simple numbered system (001, 002, and so on). In order to keep track of which Geocache you are searching for, you will want to identify it with its GCID number. You will find this at the top of the cache listing. It always begins with the letters "GC." Enter this in the "name" field on your waypoint marking screen, or use an abbreviated version of the cache name.

Now scroll down to the "Location" field. This is where you will enter the longitude and latitude of the cache you are going to hunt for. Your unit will default to your current location, so it is essential that you adjust the numbers to the geocache you are looking for. Entering coordinates can be complicated at first, but with practice you will be able to do it quickly and easily. DOUBLECHECK YOUR DATA ENTRY **BEFORE** YOU LEAVE THE SCREEN!

On the basic yellow eTrex, press the enter button and use the "UP" and "DOWN" buttons on the left side (top and middle) to scroll through the numbers. Press "ENTER" to select the number you need and move on to the next number in the coordinates.

On the eTrex units with the "Click Stick," use the click stick to scroll through the number keyboard. Push in on the click stick to select your desired number and move on.

With the Magellan eXplorer series, use the toggling "ENTER" button to move up and down through the number list, push to the right to move on the next number in the coordinates. Push in on the button to move to the Latitude coordinates on the next line.

Once the numbers are entered, move to the bottom of the screen to "OK" on the Garmin units and "SAVE" on the Magellan.

Alternatively, on the Garmins you can choose "Goto" instead of "OK." At this point, you're ready to move on to the cache!

With the Magellan eXplorer units, you Click the "Goto" button and then choose "My Pts of Interest." From here find the GCID number for the cache you've just entered and click in on the "ENTER" button. You're now ready to go out and get the cache.

Step 4: Getting to the cache

Before you leave home you should make sure you have the following:

1. A pen (pencil) for signing the cache's logbook;
2. The printed-out cache page;
3. Trade items to leave in the geocache;
4. Safety and trail gear *appropriate* to the season and the cache area;
5. A small trash bag to assist with the CITO ethic;
6. Cache 'repair' gear (extra log page, plastic baggie, spare pencil, etc).

It's time to hit the road. Set your GPS to the navigate screen and let the arrow guide you. Hopefully you've preplanned your approach route to the cache zone so you're not driving in circles trying to find a parking place...or the cache page itself might have parking coordinates. You may want to enter these into your GPS in the same method you entered the cache location and follow them to the parking coordinates. Once there you can switch your GPS to take you to the cache coordinates.

Now it's time to hit the trail. Mark your parking location so you can find your way back easily to your vehicle! Make sure you have a good fix from the GPS satellites (your arrow seems to be pointing consistently in the same direction) and head down the trail. A compass is useful for doublechecking your GPS' direction system.

It's useful to keep your GPS on the navigation screen. The map screen is helpful to review as you get closer to the cache, and to track your progress on access trails. Most trails will wind quite a bit as you travel through the woods. Keep watching the distance indicator on your GPS to see how close you are getting to the cache. When it's down to only a few hundred feet (maybe as much as .15 mile or so) it may be time to leave the trail. Your arrow might even be pointing at a right angle to the trail. This is a good sign you're going to have to leave the

trail and find your way to the cache. Look for a game trail or faint signs of human travel accessing the cache area. As you close in, practice “Leave No Trace” and “Cache In – Trash Out” methods of travel.

Walk carefully. As soon as you leave the trail you will find yourself stepping over around and through a lot of vegetation and hazards that weren't on the trail. Be careful to watch for devils club, ‘pushki’ (wild celery) or other dangerous plants and watch for fallen logs or roots that might trip you up. It's also important that you take a good look at your surroundings so you will remember your way back to the trail. Prepare yourself to deal with possible animal encounters by reading tips on moose and bear at the Alaska Dept of Fish and Game’s excellent website:

Moose - <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=aawildlife.agmoose>

Bear - <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=bears.main>

As you move towards the cache, keep checking your GPS screen. You will notice that you're closing in on your target. When you are within 50-60 feet of the cache, stop for a moment and look around. As you continue on you will want to watch the area around you as much if not more than the GPS. When you’re within 30 feet you may want to set down the GPS to allow it to settle into a more accurate reading. It’s time to begin the final search phase...

Step 5: The search

At about thirty feet it's time to start searching with your eyes. Look for some likely cache locations. These will be at the base of trees, near fallen logs, among a pile of rocks or other locations where a box could be hidden. Very often the cache will be covered with sticks, leaves, bark or rocks to help camouflage it. Look high and low. Try to think like a geocacher: if you were hiding a box in the woods where would you put it? This is a talent that will become easier as you find more caches. Practice “Look – Lift – Replace” as you search – leaving no trace of your passage to mar others’ experience in the area. Search SAFELY – be aware of the area’s hazards! In urban zones the element of stealth is necessary to prevent accidental discovery by noncachers.

If you're having trouble finding the cache don't get discouraged. There are many factors that can cause you problems: tree cover, faulty coordinates (doublecheck that cache page printout you brought with you for accuracy and hints), low batteries in your GPS or...

exceptionally sneaky cache hidiers (whose caches will have a higher difficulty rating!)

It's helpful at this point to move a few feet away from the area your GPS is zeroing out on. Think of yourself as moving in a cloverleaf pattern. Walk out about 60 feet in any direction and then circle back towards the cache. Move slowly, allowing for any lag the GPS might be experiencing under the tree cover. Keep an eye out for those "likely cache location" and anything that might just seem out of place (like a group of sticks lying together). Good Luck!

Step 6: The find

If you found the cache, congratulations! It's time to open it up and complete your geocaching experience!

A side note: If you're caching with others (especially children) it's very important that you help them share the whole search and discovery process. If you can, contain your excitement about your find and move slowly away from the cache—trying not to draw any attention to yourself. Allow the others with you to find it. You might want to eventually let them know you've found it and play a game of "hotter/colder" with them until they get to the cache.

First things first. *Before* you take the cache out of its hiding spot take a good look at how it's hidden. It is essential that you hide the cache back in the way the owner intended for it to be hidden. Pay attention to the position the box is laying in and any particular camouflage around it.

Take care to open the container without spilling the cache contents. Caches are normally hidden in watertight containers like Tupperware or Rubbermaid. The best and most watertight container for Alaskan extremes is the surplus army ammo box. These can be a little confusing to open the first time, though. If you're right handed, grasp the lower wire handle in your left hand and hook the fingers of your right hand around the bottom of the wide metal latch and give it a firm jerk up. The can should pop open with some resistance.

One of the beautiful things about a geocache is that it tells the story of all the previous finders. Within the logbook and the trade items you'll find glimpses of their personalities, their likes and dislikes, the story of how their day was going or how the hunt went for them. You may never meet these people face-to-face, but through the cache you share an experience with them.

You might want to take something from the cache as a memento of your find. The normal practice among cachers is to "trade even or trade up." That means you'll take something that's of similar value as what you leave or you leave the cache a little richer than you found it. Caches can be full of a variety of items: CD's, children's toys, batteries and Dollar Store trinkets just to name a few. If you're planning on doing a lot of trading you might want to pack a bag with a variety of items to swap out.

Inside every cache you'll find a logbook. This is where you record your visit. Logbooks can be a lot of fun to read through so you might spend some time getting to know the other cachers in your area by reading their stories in the book. Find the first blank page and record your visit.

You'll want to record the date you were there (some cachers like to record the time too) and sign the log with your username. Other than that you might include some details about your experience with the find, you might tell about your hike or any animals you encountered. If you have kids with you tell the story of their hunt. You might also record any difficulties you encountered, like non-geocachers (also known as muggles) near the area.

After you've made your trades and signed the log you're pretty much done with the cache. You now need to rehide the cache the way you found it. Be sure to seal any baggies that were inside and seal the container lid down tight. The extra care you take to close the cache up and rehide it ensures that the next finder has as enjoyable an experience as you.

It's time to get back to out of the woods now. Hopefully you remember the way back to the trail, or you've recorded your parking coordinates on the GPS to 'backtrack' out to the vehicle.

Step 7: Logging your find online

Your online log serves many purposes. It lets the cache owner know that the cache has been found, it allows other seekers to draw from your experience and it provides you with a handy record of your caching career.

You begin the process of logging your find in the same place you began your hunt—at the cache page itself. Pull the page back up on your computer screen. Make sure that you're logged in with your username and

password. At the top right of the cache page you will see a series of links. The one at the top is labeled, "log your visit." Click this to move on to the logging page.

At the top of the "Post a new log" page, you will see a drop down box for the "Type of log" you're making. Logging your find is just one part of the history of your geocaching experience. There are times when you will log that you didn't find the cache and other times when you will simply post a note. Occasionally you will encounter a cache that might have a problem (perhaps it's missing or damaged or there's something dangerous or disturbing in the area) and you might post a "Needs Archived" or "Needs Maintenance" log. For our purpose, though, we're concentrating on logging your find. So choose the "Found it" from the dropdown box and move on down the page.

The next line offers you the option of changing the date you logged the cache. If you weren't able to get back to the computer for a day or so you might need to adjust this. However, we're going to assume that you rushed right home to log the cache, so just make sure the date is correct and move on.

The checkbox on the next line offers you the opportunity to add a waypoint to the log. Occasionally you will find a cache where the coordinates seem to be quite a bit off (30 feet of variance or less is considered to be normal). In these occasions you might want to use this feature to record the coordinates that you got at the cache site.

The large text box below is for recording the body of your log. Your online log does not need to be an exact copy of your physical log in the cache. You'll have more time to reflect on the experience and write your online log. Feel free to share as much or as little as you like about your hunt. Most online logs will include a list of any items taken and left in the cache. This is just common courtesy for the owner and other finders. Anything else you write is up to you.

You'll notice that above the large text box there is a smiley face in a gray square. Clicking on this will pull up a new window with several different smilies that can be used to dress up your log. You can copy and paste the smiley codes into your log or type them yourself, just be sure to include the brackets (like this: [:)]).

Under the large text box you'll notice a checkbox that gives you the option of encrypting your log. There may be occasions when you will include "spoilers" in your logs. "Spoilers" are information that gives away a little too much. They could "spoil" the cache hunt for others who read them. If this is the case clicking this button will encrypt the log with the same Rot13 code used in the hint. Also, if need to encrypt just part of the log, click the button but place the text you want to remain un-encrypted within brackets ([like this]).

Once you're satisfied that you've told enough of your story, click the "Submit log entry" button. After it's processed and entered into the system you will be taken to a page where you can view your log. Congratulations. You've done it!

Of course, these are just the basics. As you cache more you'll pick up travelbugs and log them through the cache pages. You will upload photos that you've taken while on the hunt and you will find new ways to personalize your logs and share your experiences with others. But for now, you found your cache, you shared your experience and you're probably eager to go out and find the next one.

Note: it's critical that you also log your 'DNF' (did not find) experiences as you go along. This helps the cache owner and other cachers know the cache wasn't found and may be missing. Experienced cache owners know to go check their caches when several 'DNF' logs appear. Your honesty in reporting a DNF helps others in the game and lets you stay humble as you hunt!

Credits: *The bulk of this material is from Geocaching University's excellent website tutorial "Geocaching 101 – The Basics of the Hunt," found online at www.geocacher-u.com*

Other Resources:

- GeocacheAlaska! Education page: <http://www.geocachealaska.org/education.htm>
- GeocacheAlaska! Related Links: <http://www.geocachealaska.org/relatedlinks.htm>
- GeocacheAlaska! Forums: <http://geocachealaska.proboards.com/index.cgi>
- Geocaching.com Resources: <http://www.geocaching.com/resources/default.aspx>
- Geocaching Glossary of Terms: <http://www.geocaching.com/about/glossary.aspx>
- Geocaching Knowledge Books: <http://support.groundspeak.com/index.php?pg=kb.book&id=1>
- Geocaching.com Forums: <http://forums.groundspeak.com/GC/>