

GEOCACHING in and around the Lawrence Nature Center

Where else can you play with multi-billion dollar government equipment, other than at the Lawrence Nature Center? Well technically, you can do so anywhere in the world but why not start here? Thanks to the government's ability to put satellites into orbit around this small blue planet, we can now legally use those expensive federal projects for our own personal recreational use. Let's face it, our tax dollars were used for the atmospheric endeavors, and geocaching is one way to benefit from the use of your hard earned taxes.

So what is geocaching you may be asking? I'll quote from my source for this game, the web site www.geocaching.com. "Geocaching is a real-world, outdoor treasure hunting game using GPS-enabled devices. Participants navigate to a specific set of GPS coordinates and then attempt to find the geocache (container) hidden at that location."

The somewhat clandestine, high tech game came to Drexel Woods in October 2010. Let me back up in time a little bit though. In early 2010 the Board of the *Friends of the Lawrence Nature Center* discussed 'planting' a geocache or multiple geocaches around the nature center and the adjacent Drexel Woods property, with hopes of getting more people to explore our little known nature preserve. Little did we know that the popularity of geocaching in our area and the somewhat secret demand for additional geocaches on public lands was so great that "we", the *Friends of the LNC*, had to do nothing for our wish to come true.

We would like to thank geocacher Caver Bill, for hiding the first geocache at this forty-five acre nature preserve. He placed the geocache sometime in October of last year and as the saying goes, the rest is history. As I write this article, at least thirty-five people (or groups of people) have visited Drexel Woods to search for his geocache. According to the geocaching web site, thirty-three have been successful and two have not.

I first tried geocaching shortly after learning about this popular worldwide activity at a 2009 'Take Our Children to Work Day' program with my then ten year old son. We learned how easy and fun this game is and as the instructor informed us, a great way to share quality time with your family. I sort of got hooked on this latter quality, and Zach and I immediately set out upon our quest to find our first geocache within two hours of that initial exposure to the game. Unfortunately, we did not find the cache at that time but it was the start of learning more about the activity and our quest to find other local geocaches. A few days later we went back and were able to find the geocache in the Mill Hill section of Trenton.

You can learn everything you need to know about geocaching from the web site www.geocaching.com. It is easy to learn, free to sign up (all you need is a username and password), and a Global Positioning System or GPS unit, to get started. I have an old GPS unit (about 10 years old) which is not as accurate

as most new and improved GPS units are these days. In fact GPS units are now found in cars, boats, computers and phones. Hand-held GPS models are far cheaper now than I paid a decade ago.

Geocaches are placed at locales throughout the world, in varying types of locations and with varying difficulties of terrain and skill required to find them. The ranking system goes from 1 to 5 for both, 1 being the easiest. The Drexel Woods geocache is rated 2/2. Some may just be physical locations such as breathtaking views in some remote location, while others may be very challenging for those with specialized skills such as scuba diving for a cache on a sunken vessel. Many provide historical facts or educational information. Some are hidden in trees, under logs, in man-made structures, or just about anywhere one's mind can imagine. Some are large and some very small. Anyone can place a geocache out at a location and post it. Many or most are on public land. If you type in the zip code 08648, you'll find at least eighteen geocaches right here in Lawrenceville! And many are relatively easy to find; easy once you get into the mindset of geocachers and familiar with where they hide their treasures. Sometimes there will be clues that you can decrypt if you really want some help (like myself) and sometimes you are on your own to seek out the cache with just the GPS coordinates. It is all based upon longitude and latitude, orientation, geography, ones ability to navigate in unknown terrain and their intuition. I am a novice geocacher and seek relatively easy geocaches since I tend to have little free time. I know others who have thousands of finds and travel great distances to add more to their life list.

So I am sure the reader is saying "so what do you get if you find one?" You mean besides the thrill and satisfaction of the successful hunt? Well it varies dependent upon the person who hides the cache *and* those who find it. Generally speaking, there is a log sheet and pencil to record your finding date, username (nickname or codename) and comments. You can also log onto the web site, record your comments and read those left by others who either found or could not find the cache. To me, this is also very much part of the fun of geocaching; seeing how others rated the challenge compared to your own experience. And for newbies like myself, I often seek out different clues from those who found the cache such as, "harder than I thought", "watch out for the sticker bushes" or "nice view of the ocean from the cache". Once I become a seasoned veteran of the game, I may no longer need those additional clues.

The cache will often start out with small, odd trinkets and when you find it, you trade one of your own trinkets from home with one of those left by others. Many of these items are similar to those I use to find in the 'goodie bags' my sons brought home after a birthday party at Chuckie Cheese. I must admit, we left a 2" plastic snake in the Drexel Woods geocache. It is not the value of the cache that is important to geocachers, it is the thrill of the search and the sense of accomplishment. We did leave a \$100 bill once. Of course it was an eraser with the \$100 bill face imprinted on it, but it was fun to write 'we left a \$100 bill' in the log book. I wondered if I logged onto the web site and typed "we left a \$10 bill" in the comments field if we would have had a rush of people visiting the geocache (and hence Drexel Woods) but that would be completely unethical to do so.

Some folks are very serious about geocaching and there are all types of interesting items that could bbe present. There are coins for "first time finders" and one called a "travel bug". A travel bug is kind of cool. Say the geocacher puts a travel bug, a unique geocaching coin, in a cache. He or she may want

that bug to go from Lawrenceville, NJ to let's say, the Grand Canyon in AZ. Geocachers will take and deposit the travel bug from one location to another, closer and closer to the destination. You can track where the travel bug has gone based on the locales it was dropped off and picked up. Once again, check out the web site for more details and some very interesting stories of travel bugs going throughout or even around the world.

My son and I started geocaching as a hobby. We started local, trying to find those here in Lawrence and some in Trenton where I work. When we go somewhere, we search the geocaching web site to see if there is a geocache nearby. Visiting his grandparents, we once searched a storm drain in a parking lot of a restaurant in Rahway, NJ. No luck with the cache, and no strange looks from passersby; we attempted 'the find' on a dreary day when no one was around. Another part of the activity is to find the cache *without* anyone else seeing you do so, particularly those who know nothing about geocaching! So the urban geocaches are often the trickiest to accomplish but something that we try to do when we are in cities.

I am sort of embarrassed to say that while I have searched and found several geocaches in Lawrence Township and other parts of the State, I have only a few 'finds' under my belt. I am not addicted to geocaching, as many people do become. However by simply writing this article I have peaked my own curiosity once again and want to see what new geocaches there may be along our route to our upcoming vacation spot. Joining this Secret Society of Geocachers is really kind of cool. I hope I have sparked some interest in you. I highly recommend and encourage you to take your son or daughter, spouse, relative or friend out to the preserved lands in our township and surrounding areas and try to find some of the local geocaches! It can be a great time for families and you may discover a nice place to walk, enjoy, breathe some fresh air, see some wildlife. Check out geocaching and you may get hooked too!

Thank you Caver Bill for the first LNC Drexel Woods geocache and bringing more people to this little preserve that our township officials had the courage to save over a decade ago!