

# How to Go Geocaching

Explore this Article ■ Steps ■ Questions & Answers ■ Things You'll Need ■ Tips and Warnings

Co-authored by 80 contributors

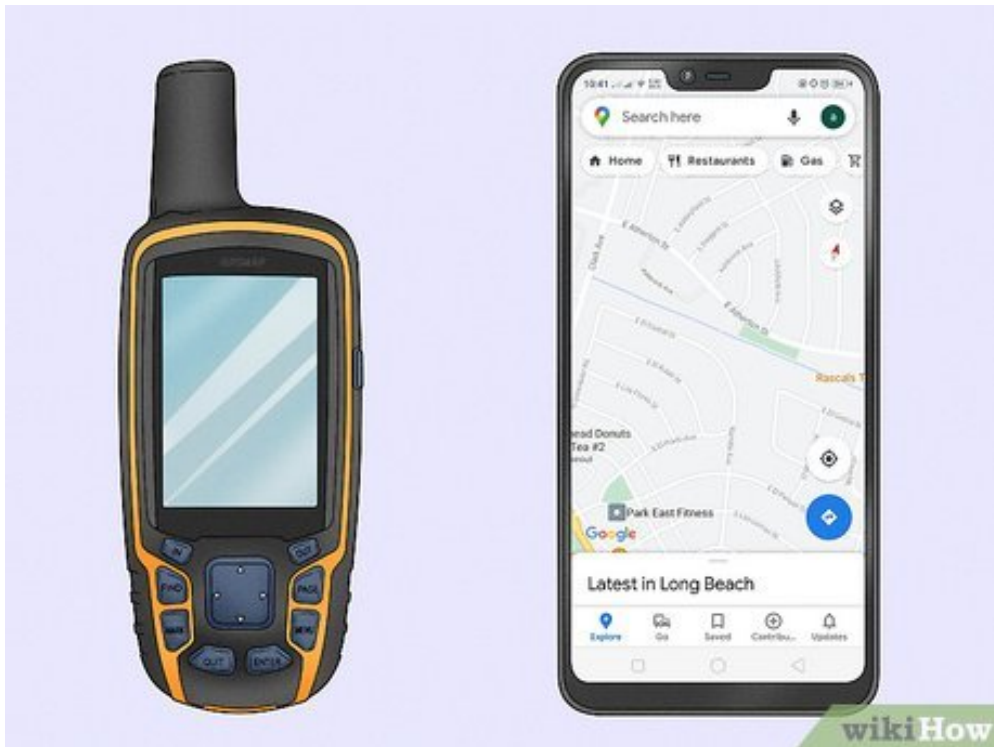
Last Updated: December 17, 2021

Geocaching is a fun outdoor activity that involves using a hand-held GPS to guide you to a hidden container (or "cache"). We'll show you everything you'll need to get started with geocaching, including what materials you'll need, geocaching etiquette, and what to do once you've found a cache.

## Things You'll Need

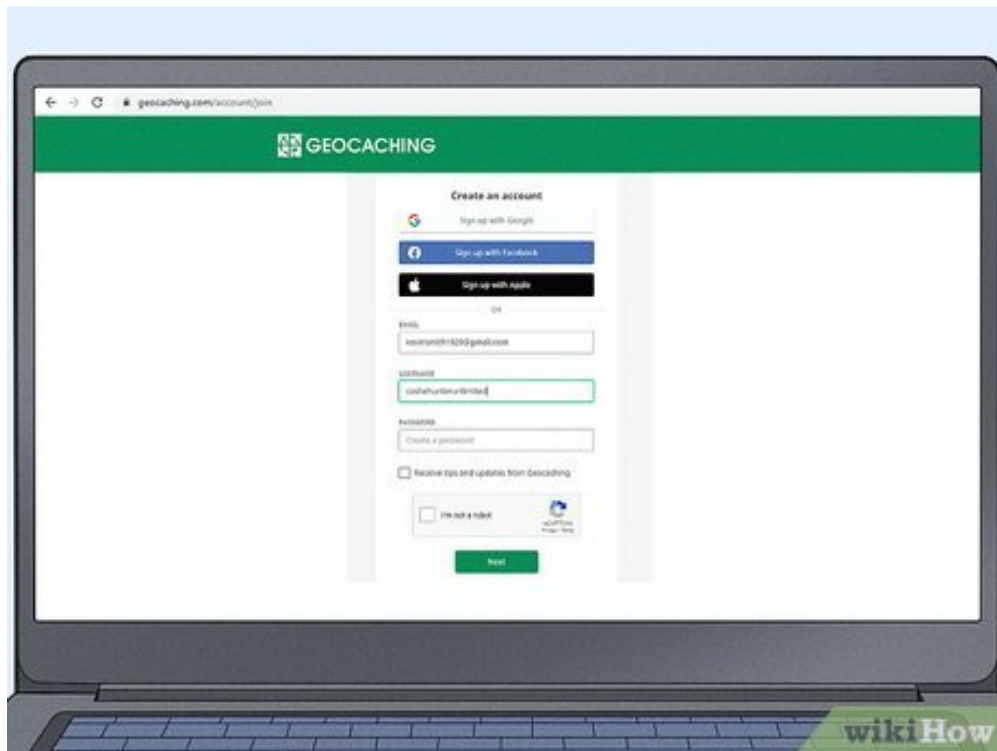
- ☐ A Global Positioning System Receiver, also known as a GPSr or simply a GPS unit or a GPS enabled Phone
- ☐ Details of the geocache from the caching site
- ☐ Cache items for trading
- ☐ Pen or pencil
- ☐ Outdoor wear
- ☐ Insect repellent
- ☐ Sunscreen
- ☐ Walking/hiking shoes
- ☐ Flashlight

## Steps

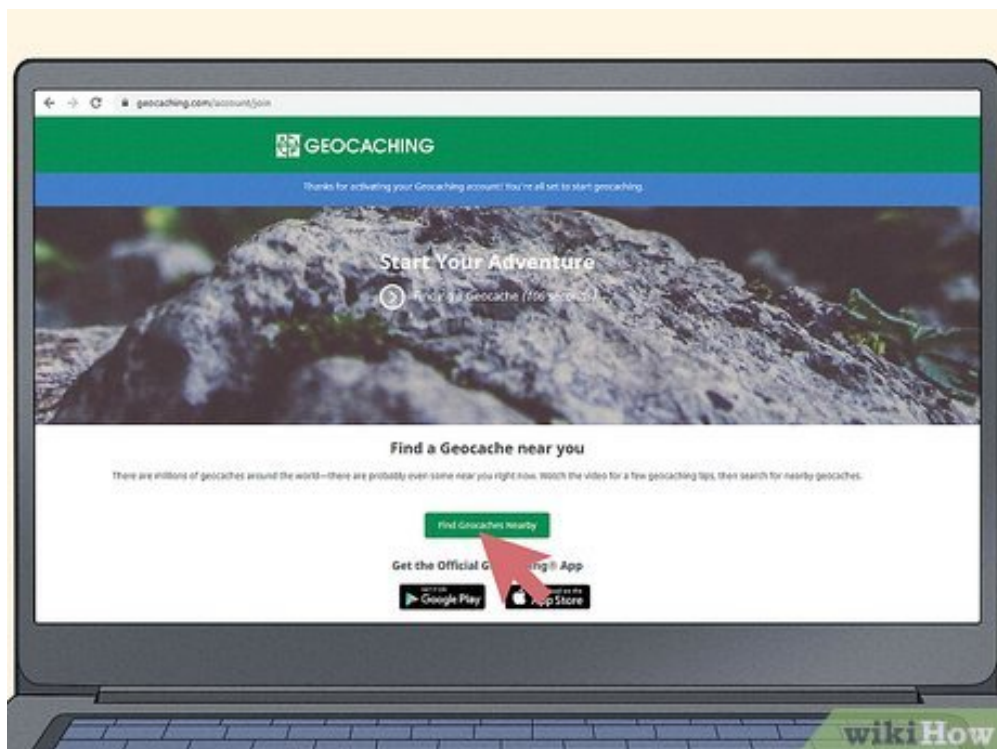


**1** **Acquire a GPS receiver (or a smartphone like an Android/iPhone, or tablets with GPS).** You can purchase, rent or borrow one. You can also download the Geocaching intro app onto your smartphone.

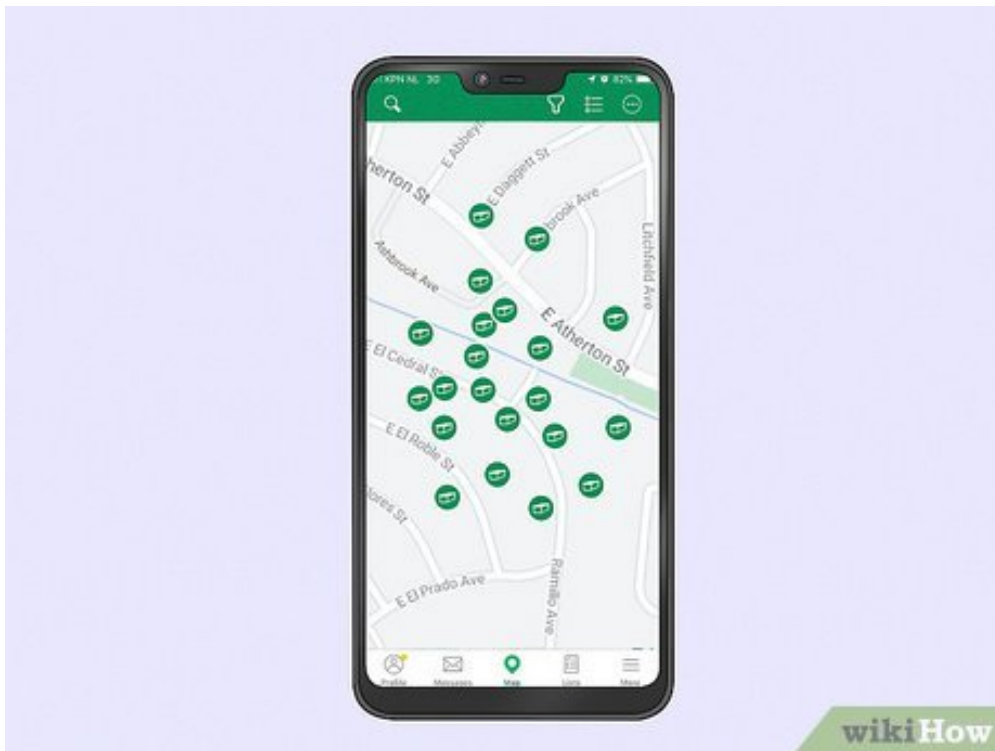
- Certain models have the capability of "paperless geocaching" described in the Tips section, below.



**2 Create an account with a cache listing site.** Some sites offer completely free access to the caching data and all site features, but some sites offer "premium" member status to access certain features. There are caches on several different sites, so explore them and decide which you prefer.



**3 Find a list of caches near you using the search feature on the website.** Geocaches are hidden *everywhere*, so wherever you are, there are sure to be some for you to find.



**4 Choose a cache which interests you.** Record any details or hints on a notepad or by printing the page out. Be sure to check the difficulty rating. You may not want to search for a cache that's too difficult if you are just starting out.



**5 Create a waypoint in your GPS unit for the cache, using the latitude and longitude coordinates from the cache webpage.** You may also be able to transfer the cache's coordinates to your GPS using the supplies connection cable if you have the correct software.



**6 Bring a small item for trading at the cache.** It should be something you are willing to give away, but might be of some interest or value to another person. Some caches follow themes, so be sure to bring something according to that theme if you plan to trade.



**7 Make your way towards the cache.** You can use your GPS unit's "navigate" feature (or equivalent) to produce an arrow on the screen pointing you to the waypoint you have just created.



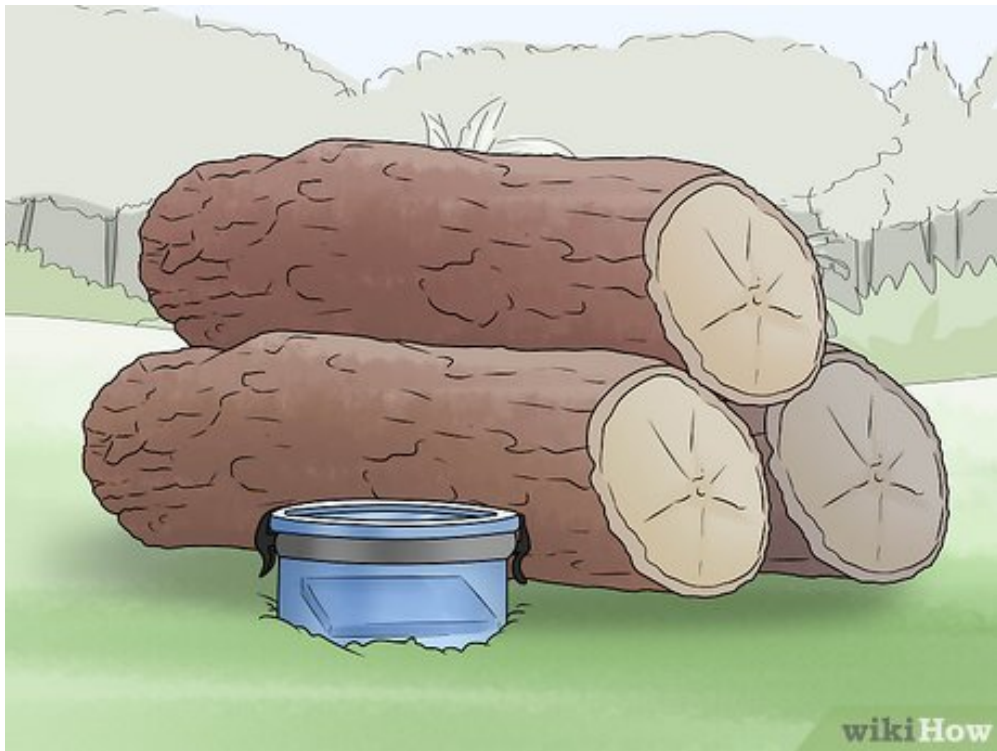
**8 Identify the cache.** Caches come in all shapes, sizes, and colors; so be on the lookout. Take note of the precise way the geocache has been hidden once you find the cache. You will need to replace it in an identical fashion. But remember, geocaches are never hidden underground!



**9 Open the cache and browse the trinkets and goodies within it.** Consider if you would like to take anything in exchange for the cache item you have brought along with you. You should always trade something of equal or greater value to keep the sport fair and honest. You are not required to make a trade if you don't want to. Alternatively, you can help "restock" a poorly filled cache by leaving your item and taking nothing.



**10 Find the logbook within the cache.** Make a new entry in the book noting the date and your caching site username. If the logbook is particularly small, as in a micro or nano cache, sign only your initials.



**11 Return the cache.** Close the cache securely and hide it in the exact same place and manner in which you found it for the next person.



**12** **Return home and log into your chosen caching website.** Find your chosen cache once again and use the "Log Your Visit" feature (or equivalent) to record that you found the cache. Include the same kinds of details that you wrote in the cache logbook.



## Community Q&A

### Question

**What do BYOP and PNG mean?**



**Christian Vihstadt**  
Community Answer

BYOP stands for "Bring Your Own Pencil." PNG stands for "Park N Grab," which means the cache is very easy to find.

Helpful 19 Not Helpful 5

### Question

**I am going on a beach vacation. Should I consider doing this on the beach?**



Community Answer

Sure, feel free to do this wherever you like!

Helpful 17 Not Helpful 6

### Question

**How do I know where to start if I live in a small town?**



Community Answer

You can check [geocaching.com](https://www.geocaching.com), where you can find a map of the caches in your area. On the main page top bar, click on "Play," then "View Map." It is free to start an account, and then you can download coordinates to your GPS or download the free app onto your phone (iOS or Android).

Helpful 11 Not Helpful 2

#### Question

### How do I get the information I need to my GPS unit?



Community Answer

You can use a USB cable that will plug into your GPS unit and upload the coordinates. You can also enter them manually.

Helpful 10 Not Helpful 5

#### Question

### Are maps available for purchase?



Community Answer

No, because caches change all the time. Some are taken down, others are put up or moved, so there are no physical maps; it would be impossible to constantly keep them up to date. However, on the geocaching website there is an updated map you can always use to find any geocache. You do need to make an account first, though. If you really have a thing for physical maps, you could print it, I suppose.

Helpful 9 Not Helpful 3

#### Question

### I how do I set up a cache?



Cloudysky1562  
Community Answer

You set up a cache by getting a waterproof, lock tight container. Get a piece of paper to be the logbook, put some SWAG (Stuff We All Get or trading items) into the container and seal it. Find a location that is 528 feet away from other caches and place it. Register the name and coordinates on geocaching.co m and you're done!

Helpful 3 Not Helpful 1



## Tips

- A common mistake by novices and young cachers is to "bee-line" for the cache, ignoring whatever obstacles may lay ahead. Geocaching teaches us the value of planning a strategy and route. Use your eyes and ears and knowledge of the area to stay on roads, trails, and footpaths for as long as possible, even if this means you may be heading away from the cache for a brief period of time. Even experienced cachers find themselves traveling many miles only to find themselves on the wrong side of a ravine or river.
- Be sure to log your visit to the cache on the caching website. This may seem like unnecessary administrative work after the fact, but it helps the cache owner keep track of the condition of the cache by monitoring when it was last found, as well as gives you credit for your find. It only takes a minute, and when you start racking up double-digits in finds, you may wish you had logged each and every one.
- When you return the cache to its hiding place, remember that the cache must survive wind, rain, temperature and humidity variances, and in some parts of the world, ice, snow, freezing, and thawing. Ensure that it is closed securely and hidden appropriately. Take note of any problems with the cache's condition so that you can report it to the cache owner later (i.e.: if it is wet inside, has a hole in it, will not close properly, etc.)

- Minimize environmental impact by sticking to trails for as long as possible, and follow CITO. Cache In, Trash Out simply means that you pick up garbage on the way out to keep geocaching's impact on the environment positive. Often, you will find an official CITO bag inside of a cache, but you should bring along your own plastic bag as well.
- GPS receivers can be purchased at your nearest outdoors/hiking/trail shop, home hardware store, electronics store or department store. You may also wish to check eBay, or the forums on caching sites, for used units. Expect to pay \$100-150 for an adequate unit. Expect to pay more for features such as increased position accuracy, easier controls, larger screen, map capabilities, etc. The most popular brands are Garmin and Magellan. There is also a new, just for geocaching, GPS receiver released, called a Geomate. It is very simple and is easy to use, perfect for kids. At a lower cost than most other GPS receivers it is a great way to get in on the fun.
- Don't rely on the location system on a first-generation iPhone, as it's not as accurate as a GPS. New 3G iPhones have full GPS built in and should work as well as any other device.
- Bring a pen. Small caches do not always have space for a pen, and you may not get to sign the logbook.
- There are slang words that are commonly used in geocaching by 'cachers of different areas, so be aware of these when hanging out with experienced geocachers, and do not be afraid to ask what they mean!
- When your GPS unit guides you to within approximately ten meters of the cache, you will have to rely less on your GPS and instead rely more and more on your notes and deduction skills. Look around and ask yourself, "Where would I hide a cache?" Remember to look up and down, caches can be on the ground or hanging within reach on a tree.
- Make sure that you know all of the current rules concerning geocaching. These include that geocaches may not be buried underground, although in the early stages of geocaching, this was allowed.
- When selecting a caching item to bring along for trading, consider that things like marbles, bouncy balls, key chains and batteries are popular trading items for geocaches. If you have a local "dollar store", these items are often perfect. Also, cultural items that cannot be bought easily help enrich the sport and make cache finds more interesting for others (ex: commemorative pins, patches, crafts, etc.)
- Most geocaches have an official geocache written on it, so if yours doesn't make sure it's a geocache, not some random box stuck in the woods.
- If you're caching with your smartphone, keep in mind that the phone's GPS is only accurate to about 30 feet (9 m). Once you're near the location of the cache, begin searching for it.
- When you think you have found the cache, make sure it is not actually a letterbox hidden nearby. Letterboxes contain a hand-carved rubber stamp which should not be removed from the letterbox, as well as a logbook. Trade items should never be placed in a letterbox.
- It is possible to triangulate the position of the cache. From 100 feet away, follow the arrow on your GPS towards the cache. Repeat twice walking from a different directions. Where these three paths meet, hopefully one point, should be the cache location. This technique usually gets you within a step or two of the actual cache so if it is hidden well you know where to concentrate your search. If you choose to hide a cache, you should use this technique to get the best coordinates for your cache.
- Consider using geocaching software programs designed to help a geocacher manage a list of found and not found caches, find cache locations with street-level and topographical maps, fly-over a target cache location, and record field notes and log entries to later upload to a geocaching website. Most GPS receivers allow geocachers to load a list of caches into a receiver using a data cable and a good software program.
- Paperless Geocaching is possible with certain Garmin models (Colorado, Mobile XT,

Nuvi, Oregon, Street Pilot, Zumo possibly others, as well). This allows for display of cache info, logs, icons on the GPS screen and optionally play audio alerts when approaching cache locations, but requires a premium account on certain geocaching sites.

- The arrow on your GPS can deceive and frustrate you due to a number of main factors:
  - A GPS can only deduce the direction you are facing by tracking your position over a period of time. Once you stop moving, it can no longer do this. Therefore, take into account that the arrow will most likely be wrong once you are stopped. Take a half-dozen steps to adjust the arrow accordingly.
  - Your current position is as calculated by the GPS is not exact. In short, anything that blocks your view of the sky will reduce the accuracy of your position. Learn how to display your GPS unit's accuracy so that you can factor it into your search. The accuracy of your position can vary widely due to any number of factors, including:
    - Tree cover
    - Power lines
    - Mountains
    - Other people
    - Number of satellites above the horizon at the time of day in your part of the world. Trimble offers a free downloadable tool that allows you to plan when the most satellites are in the sky in your part of the world.
    - Large, flat objects that may cause a satellite signal to reflect off of it, like a large building.
- Be aware of the different variations on the traditional geocache. They offer a variety of experiences depending on what you are in the mood for:
  - Multi-caches promise to send you to more than one waypoint prior to you finding the final cache location.
  - Microcaches indicate smaller containers, often only large enough for a small log sheet (bring your own pencil). They are often found in places where a larger cache container would be impractical.
  - Puzzle caches may require you to solve a puzzle of some kind to obtain the coordinates for the cache.
  - Virtual caches have no container at all, but require you to find some information at the location, or take a picture to prove you found it. These are popular in sensitive environmental areas.
  - Locationless caches, which are more like a "scavenger hunt", challenge you to find an object or landmark that could be anywhere, and take a picture to prove you found it.
  - Moving caches begin with the original coordinates of a real location, but when found are moved to another location. The new coordinates are sent to the cache owner and changes are made to the cache page accordingly.

## Entering Coordinates

- Be sure to double check the entry of coordinates into your GPS unit. A typo can send you hunting in the wrong direction. Many GPS offer a link cable to your PC so that you can download the waypoint directly to your GPS unit.
- The same position on Earth can be expressed in many very different ways. The two things that affect this are:
  - Map Datum: Various world surveys, map systems, and world-shape mathematics express the same position as very different expressions. Geocaching uses the popular WGS84 datum, so ensure that your GPS is configured accordingly. For example purposes, the following locations are all the same point on Earth

expressed in only three of the many available datums:

- WGS84: Used by the NAVSTAR GPS System
- NAD83: Almost equivalent to the WGS84 Map Datum, but used on newer topographical maps
- NAD27, or for the continental US, NAD27CONUS, used on older USGS topographical maps
- Coordinate Format: For WGS84, the same coordinate can be expressed in slightly different formats. Ensure that your GPS uses the same format that your geocaching website does. It is helpful to think of this in the same way you might express how much change is in your pocket (ie: one might say that they have \$1.35, or 1 dollar, 3 dimes, and 1 nickel). For example, the same position on earth can be expressed as:
  - N 44.659234deg, W 63.326711deg - this is in "degrees" or DD.DDDDDD format since it only contains one number (degrees) each for latitude and longitude
  - N 44deg 39.55404', W 63deg 19.60266' - this is in "degrees, minutes" or DD MM.MMMMMM format since it contains degrees and minutes (')
  - N 44deg 39' 33", W 63deg 19' 36" - this is in "degrees, minutes, seconds" or DD MM SS format since it contains degrees, minutes ('), and seconds (")

## Trackable Items

- Some popular items found in caches are "trackable" items, such as "Travel Bugs ®", "Traveler Tags" or geocoins. A tracking number on the item is used to log the trackable items journey from cache to cache on a website.
  - A Travel Bug is a metal tag engraved with a unique tracking number.
  - Traveler Tags can be any item with a tracking number written on it.
  - Many Geocoins are also trackable.
- Many Trackable items have a particular mission or theme that the owner who created and released the trackable item wishes it to accomplish. For example to be transported across the country to reach another geocacher in another region.
- If you take a trackable item, it is your responsibility to help it to accomplish its goal or move it to another cache.

## Terms and Expressions

- Common acronyms for logbooks and your online log:
  - TNLN - Took Nothing, Left Nothing
  - TFTH - Thanks For The Hike
  - TFTC - Thanks for the Cache
  - SL - Signed Logbook.
- Muggle - a non-geocaching person which may endanger the cache if they learn about it. You want to make sure that when you bring the cache out into the open, there is nobody around to see you. In addition, re-hide it the same way you found it. Destroyed caches are often said to be "muggled".
- Plundering - Plundering caches is rather like mugging caches, but in a different way. When a cache is plundered, the cache has been taken completely.
- PNG means park n grab, which means it's an easy cache near a road or parking lot. These are often hidden in lamppost skirts.



## Warnings

- Always carry a compass. It not only helps you find the cache by using magnetic bearings, but if your GPS ceases functioning, you will have a backup method to find your way out of the woods.
- Before you leave to go geocaching, tell somebody where you're going and when you expect to be back. It may be helpful to leave a copy of the cache details with them. In case you get lost, this individual will have specific coordinates to help in a search

effort.

- Make sure to focus on your surrounding area more than your GPS unit. Only periodic checks of your instrumentation are necessary. It is far more important to stay safe and watch where you are going.
- Learn how to use all the features of the GPS unit properly before venturing out. Many GPS units have a "bread crumb" or "track back" feature which will allow you to retrace your footsteps if you become lost. Familiarize yourself with this feature before venturing out, as it may save your life. In fact, it is a good idea to take your GPS unit's manual with you, just in case you get lost and need to know how to access a certain feature.
- Bring a flashlight regardless of the time of day you are going geocaching. If you are lost in the woods beyond daylight hours, a flashlight will make finding your way (as well as being found) a lot easier.
- In this era of heightened security you need to consider the environment when you plan your cache placement. For example you should not hide containers near areas or buildings that may be considered terrorist targets. If you cause an unintended bomb scare you could face fines, criminal charges, or will be required to pay restitution for public expenses.
- Never leave without reading the entire cache description. It often contains specific warnings about terrain, any possible hazards or unsafe areas, and legal issues about which private land to avoid.
- It is your responsibility to obey local laws. There is more than one approach to a cache. For example, NO caching site can give you the right to trespass through private land. If you suspect that your course may lead you through somebody's backyard, find an alternate route.
- Do not place food or potentially harmful items in caches. Broadly, these contain anything that could attract animals (i.e.: food) as well as anything that is not considered child-friendly (i.e., knives, alcohol, tobacco, weapons, pornography, drugs, etc.). If you see some of these items in a cache, you may remove it, and report it to the cache owner when you return home to log your visit.
- Once you are forced to leave an area you are familiar with and venture into the woods, create another waypoint. If worse comes to worst and you get disoriented or lost, you can always navigate back to this waypoint.
- Don't forget to bring along water and snacks.
- Carry basic first aid and survival kits for use in case of emergencies.
- Bring lots of extra batteries for your GPS, flashlight, and anything else you might be relying on to help you. The small cost is worth preventing getting lost. NiMH rechargeable batteries are a cost effective and environmentally friendly option.
- Check the weather forecast before you go and pay special attention to the UV index, wind speed and direction, chances of precipitation, and the forecasted low temperature. Dress and appropriately and bring the clothing, sunscreen, and rain protection that you are likely to need. The most common mistakes by outdoor novices are:
  - Wearing jeans: Jeans are strongly discouraged as they "wick" moisture from the pant legs, take a long time to dry, and do not keep you warm.
  - Many people underestimate on how muddy (or at least wet) their feet are going to get, so wear a good pair of outdoor hiking boots. A pair of extra socks doesn't take up much space and can help immensely when your feet get wet.
  - Planning for the cold and rain: Remember to protect your extremities in cold conditions (i.e., your feet by wearing wool or fleece socks, your hands by bringing a pair of good gloves or mitts, your ears and head by bringing a warm toque). Dressing in layers allows you to adjust to changing conditions.
  - Planning for the sun and UV: Even if it cloudy, UV rays are damaging your skin. Geocaching is a lot of fun and you may stay out much longer than you had intended, so wear a hat and apply sunscreen.

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Co-authors: **80**

Updated: **December 17, 2021**

Views: **440,527**

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