

Electronic scavenger hunt attracting fans worldwide

■ A geocaching event was held Saturday at the Greater Hazleton rail-trail.

By JIM DINO
Staff Writer

On the TV series "Batman," the Riddler would leave Batman and Robin clues to his next crime, so they could try to catch him.

Ever hear of a poker run, where cards are used as clues to follow a route? Or how about a scavenger hunt?

Any of those games could be used to describe geocaching, which basically is an electronic scavenger hunt.

The annual geocache event was held Saturday at the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails walking trail.

What makes this scavenger hunt high-tech is the use of GPS, or global positioning satellite, devices. They're not like the gadgets in vehicles, but are the hand-held variety, which are more durable and better to use for geocache hunting.

"A car GPS will get you in the area where a geocache is, but not exactly," said Joe Stefanoski, who has become

the Internet, and provided some direction as to where the geocaches were located along the trail.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, which is overseeing construction of the trail, explained how the website works.

"You go to www.geocache.com, and type in your ZIP code," Skulsky said. "It will then tell you where the geocaches in your area are located."

There were some experienced geocachers on hand Saturday, but there were some novices, too.

Charlie Ague of Sugarloaf has become an avid geocacher in the last year. His neighbor, Wanda Cook, started a few years ago but hasn't participated recently. To get everyone's feet wet, Stefanoski gave them a few clues where the first geocache was.

"It's around this parking lot," he said, referring to the lot off East Broad Street, where the trail begins. "And, it's magnetic."

It took just a few minutes for one of the geocachers to find a metal mailbox nailed to the information kiosk at the head of the parking lot.

There it was. "There are many different kinds of geocaches," Stefanoski said. "There is a multi-cache, which are all connected together, and gives you the (GPS) coordinates to the next one. There is an earth cache, which is what they have in Centralia. And there's the puzzle caches, which have you solve a puzzle."

This one happened to be a multi-cache, and the electronic geocache device Stefanoski had magnetized under the mailbox gave clues to where the second geocache was. Walking down the path for about a quarter of a mile — and around the bend in the trail — Stefanoski stopped. "It's about 14 feet away, so you can look around," he said. "On the sheet (information printed from the Internet entry), it indicates the terrain as 1.5. A rating of 1 is flat ground. A rating of, say, 6, could be uphill or in a tree. That's extreme geocaching, when you have to climb a tree."

Stefanoski also explained how to search for one. "Since we are not allowed to bury them, we have to disguise them," he said. "If you look around, and you see something that wouldn't happen naturally — a mound of dirt, a pile of wood — that may be where it is."

He walked into a wooded

area, and reaching underneath some tree limbs that had been broken off — or possibly sheared off by lightning — he pulled out a small Tupperware container with a blue lid.

"This one is called 'broken,'" he said. "A geocache may contain tradeable items. They will be identified. The idea is to trade them for something of equal or greater value."

Stefanoski said a tradeable item he once had ended up in Alaska, even though he has participated in events no farther away than New York and New Jersey.

Ague said he plants geocaches, and includes electronics so he can monitor them.

"I have 23 of them out," Ague said. "All I do is sit in my living room and watch what happens to them."

But Stefanoski and Ague cautioned the rules mandate that a geocacher, if he or she wants to place a geocache on private land, get the landowner's permission.

"There have been people but not around here, who have placed geocaches that were found, and people didn't know what they were," Ague said. "So they called the police, and in some cases, blew up the geocaches thinking they were a bomb."

A popular activity

Even though geocaching is relatively new, it has caught on worldwide, with 1.1 million participants.

"There are geocaching groups on the Internet, like NEPAG, Northeastern Pennsylvania Geocachers, and SEPAG, Southeastern Pennsylvania Geocachers," Stefanoski said. "There are groups in Schuylkill County and the Lehigh Valley. There are three groups in New Jersey, one in northern, one central and one in southern New Jersey. They meet once a month. There are more geocachers in Afghanistan than there are in Mexico."

These clubs, or groups, organize geocache events, and even set up systems which grade what a geocacher finds.

"You get credit for certain items," Stefanoski



JAMIE PESOTINE/Staff Photographer

Joe Stefanoski opens a geocache that was hidden along the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails hiking and biking trail during an event Saturday.

said. "A panel will judge that."

Cook is going on vacation, so she attended Saturday's event to brush up so she can geocache where she is going.

To Ague, geocaching is like fishing.

"That's what I like so much about it," he said. "No

matter where you go, geocaching means there's always something for you to do. I'm going to Florida in the fall, and I'm going to get some in there. The people who live there know the good places to geocache."

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Wanda Cook opens one of 10 geocaches that were hidden.

a local expert on geocaching since attending the first geocache event at the Hazleton trail in 1996.

"The car GPS units are not as durable as the hand-held, which will still work if you drop them in the woods somewhere."

Stefanoski, who lives in Hazleton, started the same way many geocachers start — inquisitive.

"I had a GPS under my bed," Stefanoski said. "I took a magazine article off the Internet, and ran with it from there."

He led the geocachers Saturday — because he "planted" the goodies to find.

"A geocache ranges from something as small as a fingernail — they are called nanos — to the size of a Tupperware container," Stefanoski said. "The very first geocache was a bucket buried in Oregon. But there are strict rules now, and you are not allowed to bury them."

Stefanoski also designed the geocache event. He wrote a description of it on