

SEARCH PARTY

Geocaching is a treasure hunt for the 21st century – and it's coming to a wood near you. **Elisabeth Garton** goes rooting for hidden booty in the Yorkshire Dales

I am on all fours among the roots of a vast fallen oak, mud seeping into the knees of my jeans, elbow-deep in autumn leaves and yelping each time my bare hands meet a bramble. It's not a graceful state of affairs, but I don't care. I've got the geocaching bug and the hunt is on.

We're in Skipton Castle Woods in North Yorkshire, an undulating wonderland shot through with winding pathways and gnarly ancient trees. On the hill stand the medieval ramparts that gave the wood its name; at its foot, Eller Beck gurgles busily along, just as it has for centuries.

It's amid this scene of mist and mellow fruitfulness that I find my dignity dwindling, having been led to the spot by a nifty GPS device bearing the coordinates of hidden treasure. This is the third cache we've searched for, and if I don't unearth this one – I didn't find the first two – I will officially be losing, and heavily. So nothing's going to stop me from braving those brambles.

Behind me there is a whoop: fellow Broadleaver Vincent Crump has triumphed yet again. Flushed and smug, he brandishes his Tupperware spoils while I sag once more in crestfallen defeat. Still, I can't help feeling curious: what's in the box?

Geocaching is a global phenomenon, and woods make the perfect playground for this ultimate game of hide and seek. It was born in the USA in the year 2000, after GPS technology made it possible to locate even the tiniest item stashed away in the

countryside. And its appeal – a heady mix of chase and discovery, all set in the great outdoors – has seen it spread to more than 100 countries around the world, with caches recorded on all seven continents. Now the Woodland Trust is joining in, concealing caches in prime woods nationwide.

"For me it's about taking fellow cachers somewhere new, to a beautiful or unusual place they wouldn't otherwise have found," says Jen Harley, who chairs the Geocaching Association of Great Britain. "I live near Cheddar Gorge, and I've had some lovely messages from people who've found the caches I've placed there, saying they'd never have discovered this spectacular spot if I hadn't led them off the beaten track."

To get involved, you'll need to think up a personal handle – Jen goes by Maple Leaf – and join a website like geocaching.com. It's free, and you'll immediately be able to see maps showing caches near you. If your budget stretches to a GPS device, all well and good – they start from around £60 and head into the hundreds – but thrifty newbies can download a smartphone app that does much the same job.

"Geocaching is a global game of hide and seek, and woods make the perfect playground"



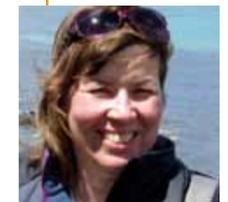
Step 1 (left): Go online and load the cache coordinates into your GPS. Step 2 (bottom left): Get out in the woods and use the clues from the website to hunt for your target. Step 3 (below): Winkle out the trove among the roots and branches. Step 4 (bottom right): Found it! Congratulations... you're a geocacher.



RICHARD FAULKS



Geocaching GOLDEN RULES



Jen Harley, chair of the Geocaching Association of Great Britain,

shares her wisdom with would-be hunters

1 When planning a search, look out for the difficulty rating of each cache – 1.1 is the easiest and should be in a fairly obvious and accessible place. The trickiest level is 5, and these are usually well camouflaged – beginners beware!

2 Stand back and think before hunting. Where would you have hidden it? In a hollow tree, beside that stump? Maybe the cache is attached by a magnet clinging to the underside of a bench. In short, don't delve right in: use your 'cacher's eye'.

3 Whenever you find a cache, log it online – the people who hide them appreciate finders' comments. And if you take anything away from the box, always leave something of equal or greater value in its place.

4 If you want to plant a cache yourself, always ask permission from the landowner, so they're fully informed and can make you aware of pitfalls. To ask about placing one in a Woodland Trust wood, email wopsmail@woodlandtrust.org.uk

5 Caches should never be buried, hidden in dry-stone walls or placed within ecologically sensitive areas. If you're unsure, ask the landowner. The police know all about geocaching, so if you get into a pickle, explain. And if in doubt, consult gagb.org.uk.



ECOSEED

1

CACHE POINTS

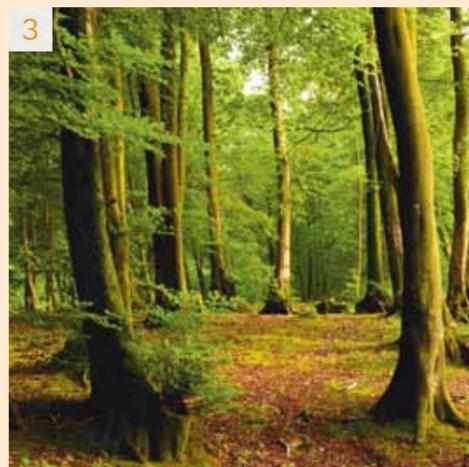
Six more Trust woods with hidden loot

- 1 CARNMONEY HILL, ANTRIM**
Rising above Newtownabbey, the woods here have immense views. The Belfast Hills Partnership has squirreled four caches across the heights.
- 2 LONDONTHORPE, LINCS**
Londonthorpe is a pretty mosaic of old and new, with Trust-planted oak and birch now maturing. 'Balamory Box Two' is among the caches here.
- 3 WENTWOOD, SOUTH WALES**
The Trust is restoring Wales's largest ancient wood to its former pomp – and there are 15 caches to find on a 5-mile walk in its western reaches.



CAROLE SUTTON/WTPL

2



JEFF MORGAN/JALAMY

3



NIAL BERNIE/WTPL

4

- 4 MONCREIFFE HILL, PERTSHIRE**
Moncreiffe Hill towers above the M90 just outside Perth, with views stretching to the Lomond Hills. It has 16 'Big Tree Country' caches to hunt down, including the intriguing 'Fox Watch' cache – look out for Reynard watching you!
- 5 BREDE HIGH WOODS, EAST SUSSEX**
The ancient woods here have rare service trees, sweet chestnut coppice and bluebells in spring. The eight caches scattered around its southern fringes include the 'Cache of the Century'.
- 6 CREDENHILL PARK, HEREFORDSHIRE**
There's an Iron Age hill fort here, bluebells in spring, plus abundant wildlife, including deer, goshawks and kestrels. Look out for the majestic yew trees planted around the ramparts – and for seven caches stashed across the site.

» More on these woods at woodlandtrust.org.uk



COLIN VARNDELL/WTPL

5



ALAN JOHNSON/WTPL

6



RICHARD FAULKES

Left: Elisabeth closes in on the hidden treasure. Below: Skipton Castle has towered over the ancient woods beneath for 700 years. Right: This little chap popped out of one of the Trust caches.

Once you've got your cache coordinates, your GPS or phone will take you within 10 feet of the loot. Inside the box you'll find a logbook to sign and often a trinket of some kind, perhaps a bauble or a small soft toy. "Each of the six caches we've hidden at Skipton contains information about the type of person who would have lived and worked in and around the castle and wood back in medieval times," explains the Woodland Trust's Paul Bunton. "There's the Huntsman, the Herbalist, the Villager and more. It's all part of a plan to plant caches in some of our best woods – you can find them at Moncreiffe Hill in Scotland too, and there'll soon be a stash in our new Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Wood."

For Luci Ryan, from Leicestershire, who has been geocaching for 18 months, the biggest eye-opener has been the effect on her children. "We've found 300 caches so far. My five-year-old son Rufus once walked nearly six miles without complaint: he and his sister get so engrossed in their quest for booty. But it's not just about the swag – one day we were caching in a wood in Woolsthorpe and saw baby frogs everywhere, hopping and slithering all over the forest floor. To this day they remember that moment and still ask if we can go to 'Frog Wood'. We've also spotted red kites, buzzards, deer – even the odd kingfisher."

RICHARD FAULKES

"It's a brilliant way to discover new places as a family, plus it's easy if time is tight or transport is limited, as you don't always have to stray far. I now know my corner of Leicestershire so well that I can picture how all the land interconnects – every nook, cranny and shortcut has become imprinted in my mind in a way it never was before. And I grew up here!" Geocaching can give great structure to country walks – and a faintly illicit thrill: "You can't let regular folk – dubbed 'muggles' by the caching community – see what you're

Out there | Geocaching



up to, so you have to be quite furtive at times," adds Luci. "It doesn't do to act too suspiciously of course – getting arrested isn't the idea at all! But that sense of being part of a vast hidden conspiracy, a secret network – that's what makes geocaching such good fun." I see her point, but by this stage my desperation to bag at least one

"That sense of being part of a secret network is what makes it such good fun"

cache today means I've abandoned any attempt at discretion. We're now scuttling downhill towards one of Eller Beck's pretty bridges, and I'm convinced there's a box crouched underneath it, like the troll from the Billy Goats Gruff.

I'm right about that, though it's not a troll – it's the Villager. And once again, Vincent gets there first. When we reach the site of the penultimate cache, Paul Bunton – who helped hide each Tupperware treat – begins giving me subtle clues behind the back of my nemeses. They help me get closer, but still no cigar. It is finally, tragically agreed that I should search for the last cache alone.

There's earthy joy to be had in prowling methodically among mossy stumps and roots, and by this time I've got what the experts call my 'cacher's eye' in. It still takes me longer than is strictly respectable, but that makes the moment my clawing hands hit the haul so much sweeter. Here is the Herbalist, and he is all mine. For a moment, at least. Then I package him back up and hide him away, and he becomes everybody else's once more.

» To get started, visit geocaching.com



PAUL BUNTON/WTPL



RICHARD FAULKES