



# VOYAGEUR TRAIL NEWS

Happy  
Holidays!



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*The Voyageur Trail Association is a non-profit, volunteer group dedicated to building and maintaining a public hiking trail along the northern shores of Lakes Superior and Huron, from Thunder Bay to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island.*

*The VTA is a member of Hike Canada En Marche, Hike Ontario, Ontario Trails Council, and Trans Canada Trail.*



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And much, much more!

## GPS Receivers - Taking Hiking into the 21st Century *by Steve Dominy*

It's somewhat ironic that I am writing an article about GPS. If you think I'm an expert you're sorely mistaken - in fact, I don't even own a unit. However, that is likely to change soon as I have discovered through research and conversations with GPS owners the power of this device. Following is what I have learned - I hope you will find these gizmos as fascinating as I do.

### What Is GPS?

GPS stands for the Global Positioning System. It refers to a system of satellites and receivers that allows people and devices to pinpoint their precise location on the earth. The heart of the system relies on 24 satellites that orbit the earth twice per day. Devices equipped with GPS equipment receive transmissions from at least a few of the satellites at any given time and are able to calculate very precise positioning data using triangulation. By recording ones position every 30 seconds or so, a GPS track is created for the route followed.

As the technology has improved, the cost of GPS devices has plummeted while the accuracy has increased. Small portable GPS receivers have become very affordable, and the accuracy is amazing. Accuracy varies based on various factors, but it can be as good as a few metres! On 2 May 2000, the U.S. Department of Defence switched off selective availability which made GPS readings less accurate. They reserve the right to turn it back on during national crises and the like, but for the most part GPS devices are now about 10 times more accurate than they were when selective availability was turned on!

### What Use is GPS to Hikers?

Many new cars are being equipped with GPS systems to help drivers with navigation. The military uses GPS to guide cruise missiles to pre-specified targets. Portable GPS devices are used

by fisherman and hikers to help navigate in the wild, and they even work under overcast conditions. If you have the GPS on for the duration of a linear hike, the GPS track makes retracing your steps to your vehicle a snap. Are you getting interested yet?

You need not travel off well-marked trails to appreciate a GPS receiver while hiking. A GPS receiver is valuable for navigating in areas where there are no trails and/or few landmarks. But even on well-established trails, a GPS receiver can show you your exact position (as either latitude and longitude coordinates, or Easting and Northing UTM coordinates in metres), distance travelled, direction and speed - it can even calculate when the sun will set! A GPS receiver is invaluable in poor weather or when it is hard to see your surroundings. Another nice feature is the ability to mark and label waypoints or points of interest that you may wish to return to, such as a bountiful berry patch!

Edition 4.0 of the Voyageur Hiking Trail Guidebook, set for release in 2006, will offer for the first time accompanying GPS tracks for the trail, either on disk or the website. Hikers having topographic maps installed on their GPS unit will be able to download these tracks to make navigating the trail easier and safer. For example, you will be able to visually compare your position relative to the trail location, which is handy if you happen to lose the trail. The GPS track you downloaded will help guide you back to the trail. It will also help you find those sometimes elusive trail access points!

### Buying a GPS Unit

Hikers should look for receivers that are small, lightweight and easy on batteries. Receivers that can connect to a computer to download tracks and waypoints before the hike or upload them after the hike (Continued on page 2)

**MEMBERS:** Don't forget to check your envelope to see when your membership expires!



## GPS Receivers *(cont'd from page 1)*

are a great plus. As with many electronics, more features equal greater cost. GPS units can range from \$100 to \$1000 depending on the kind of capabilities you are looking for. A used unit may meet your needs, but make sure it has 12 parallel channels – most receivers manufactured since 1997 have this capacity. Following are some additional features to consider.

- **Basemap.** This is highly recommended. The additional cost is marginal, and the increase in the equipment's usefulness is substantial.
- **External antenna jack.** Although not essential, hikers will benefit from the ability to safely store the receiver inside a pack with a small antenna attached to backpack shoulder straps. In addition, a magnetic antenna allows the equipment to be mounted inside a vehicle and the antenna on the roof. It is not always possible to obtain good satellite coverage through a front windshield.
- **Memory.** This is used to load detailed topographic or street-level digital maps into the receiver. As topo maps use up a great deal of memory, capacity should be at least 8 megabytes, or the receiver should include the ability to accept a memory card.
- **WAAS.** This stands for Wide Area Augmentation System, which increases GPS receiver accuracy from about 15 m to 3 m.
- **Interface.** If using the receiver with a computer, be sure that it includes data in/out ports.
- **Power source.** If you're hiking you'll be using plenty of batteries, so make sure to carry spares and consider rechargeables. If you plan to use the unit a lot in your car, you may want an adapter for your vehicle, s cigarette lighter.
- **Rocker keypad.** This is useful (but not crucial) if you plan to enter lots of text, such as waypoint labels.
- **Screen size.** For visual ease of operation, use a receiver with the largest screen that can be realistically carried. Colour is great and helps better define map features, although it does reduce battery life.
- **Waterproof.** Get gear that is at least water-resistant. Plastic bags and boxes give electronics a little additional protection.

Many hikers will probably not have the receiver on all the time, but will take it out occasionally to see where they are. Cost-conscious hikers can get satisfactory performance out of a base model GPS receiver that does not have built-in maps or advanced features, by using the receiver only to determine their current position and for tracking their progress on a paper map. □

### VTA Goodies for that Hard-to-Buy-For Person on your list...



membership \$25, Guidebook \$16.50 (members), Sweatshirt \$20, T-shirt \$15 & \$12, Crests \$3...Call Kathy 705-949-9847

## Final Word on GPS

If you do buy a GPS receiver, you should still carry a map and compass and know how to use them in case the unit fails. GPS technology will undoubtedly improve the comfort level for Voyageur Trail users, particularly given the wilderness nature of our trail and frequent lack of a defined footpath. The availability in 2006 of GPS tracks for our trail will make the hiking experience even more enjoyable. The VTA is presently investigating the possibility of loaning GPS units to members – stay tuned.

You may be interested in sharing GPS tracks for trails you have hiked in exchange for GPS data for other trails. The website <<http://www.trailpeak.com/>> www.trailpeak.com offers such a service, and also includes a GPS tutorial novices may find valuable. □

One lucky individual who pre-purchases Edition 4.0 of the guidebook at the old price of \$16.50 for members will win a **Garmin eTrex Venture GPS** receiver valued at \$189.99, generously donated by **Western Automotive** on Queen St. in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. □

In the next newsletter issue I'll tell you about the newest sport that uses GPS – geocaching!

## References

Letham, Lawrence. 2003. *GPS Made Easy ^ Using Global Positioning Systems in the Outdoors*. 4th Ed. Rocky Mountain Books, Calgary. 208 p.

<<http://www.trailpeak.com/index.jsp?cat=def&con=sp&val=gps>>  
<http://www.trailpeak.com/index.jsp?cat=def&con=sp&val=gps> GPS Tutorial.  
 Elsewhere on this website GPS data can be exchanged.



## THE MARKETPLACE

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- 2 pair fibreglass PLUS 1 pair wooden cross-country skis (200 cm)
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