

Get the Travel Bug

Upper Mississippi National Fish and Wildlife Refuge and Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge in California are putting new twists into geocaching, a sport that essentially is a high-tech treasure hunt in which players find the booty – hidden by other players – by using global position system, or GPS, devices. Then they generally record their find, return it to its original location and share their adventures online.

The targets of this innovative geocache are 22 stuffed toy birds, “hatched” on March 28, when they were distributed to geocachers attending a Curing Cabin Fever event at Upper Mississippi Refuge. Each bird wears a small, trackable metal tag (called a travel bug) and a mission card. The card reads, “I want to go to a National Wildlife Refuge in every state. Take a picture of you and me in front of the refuge sign, then place me in a geocache near the refuge. After my mission is completed, I want to migrate back to the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge where I was hatched.”

Each geocacher travels to another refuge – ideally in another state – to take the required photo and deposit the bird in the nearest cache. Since it is not legal to leave anything on a national wildlife refuge, this cache might be a nearby box or canister located with the help of online data and a GPS unit. The next person who finds that cache will see that it contains a travel bug – and the bird is on its way again. Each time the bird is left in a cache, the coordinates of the cache are recorded online for the next person to find.

One week into the program, at least one bird, nicknamed Picasso, had made it to a new locale – Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Iowa. And a geocacher who was new to the Upper Mississippi Refuge left this note online: “This place is absolutely awesome! I live only 15 miles away and have never been here. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Unlike real migratory birds, these birds have no deadline to reach California. “We like it because it’s a new sport, it’s a learning tool and it gets people outside,” says ranger Cindy Samples at Upper Mississippi Refuge, who helped plan the hunt. For more about geocaching, go to www.geocaching.com. there once you register as a geocacher.