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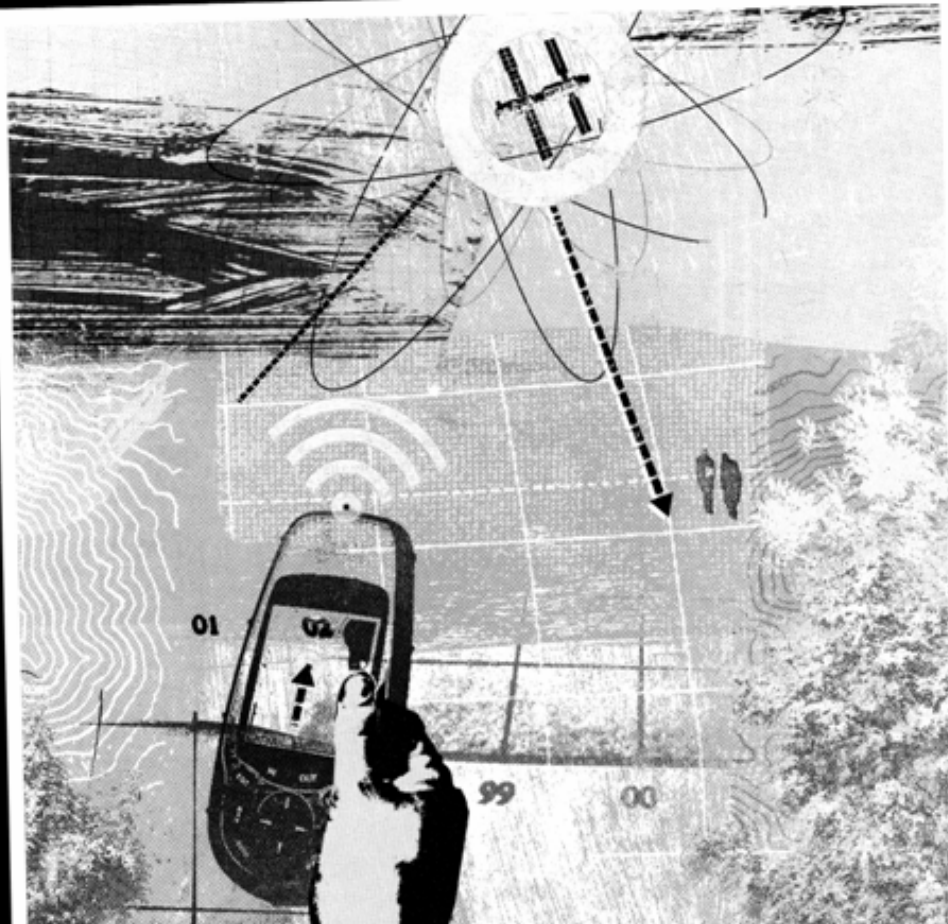
44 Stay-warm tips,
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WARM AND
TUFF: HOW
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FOUND! THE PERFECT HOT SPRING (P. 29)



The Confluence Hunters

Trailblazing GPS fanatics are coming soon to a (very) precise location near you. *By Timothy Sprinkle*

JOSEPH KERSKI IS CHASING a phantom, an invisible—and some might say imaginary—digital location. Bent over the tiny LCD screen of his Magellan GPS, the energetic 44-year-old with a mop-top fringe of brown hair glances up abruptly and asks, “Should we follow the trail until we reach 40 latitude, then take a left?”

We’re hiking through Colorado’s Arapaho

National Forest beneath autumn-gold aspens and the freshly frosted peaks of the Gore Range. If we follow his directions, we’ll veer off-trail just ahead, bushwhack through a thick grove of firs, then disappear over a 20-foot cliff. Our goal is a confluence point, a forested spot 2 miles away where the lines of 40°N latitude and 106°W longitude intersect.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MARES

A geographer with the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver, Kerski has been hunting confluence points for 6 years; he's visited more than 100 of them. And he's not alone in his obsession. Kerski is part of the Degree Confluence Project (DCP), an effort by a worldwide group of GPS enthusiasts to visit and photograph each of 14,000-plus land-based intersections on earth. That goal puts the DCP in a niche somewhere between highpointing and geocaching, but the endeavor is more than a global scavenger hunt. The searchable reports and photos from visits to more than 5,000 confluences in 172 nations already represent a valuable research database.

It's also an addictive pastime, say practitioners, who may be equal parts nerd and visionary. At geography conferences, Kerski has been known to make detours to notch new finds. "One of my great thrills was in England," he says. "This farmer, he must have had GPS, because he plowed a line through his alfalfa field right along the prime meridian." While backpackers typically seek payoffs like summit views and solitude, confluence hunters get excited about more absolute matters like longitudinal minutes. "The line was just beautiful," exclaims Kerski, without a hint of irony.

Of course, not all confluences are that easy to spot (or plow). Some are located near populated areas, but most are strewn across uncelebrated, forbidding landscapes—like the one we're hiking in now. "You get to see places you wouldn't normally go to," Kerski says, surveying the mountainous terrain. "If I ever turn up missing on a hike," he jokes, "my wife will start searching at the nearest confluence."

Kerski is one of 9,000 people to have visited a confluence as part of the DCP. Founder Alex Jarrett was first, when in 1996 he posted a report about a visit to 43°N 72°W near his New Hampshire home. At that time, consumer GPS technology was still new, and Jarrett's idea resonated with others

Get Centered

To locate a confluence point (there's always one within 50 miles) and post photos and a trip report, visit the Degree Confluence Project website at confluence.org. Or look at 3D aerial views by downloading Google Earth (free at earth.google.com), then getting the coordinates (and photos) of the 5,376 confluence points in North and South America at tinyurl.com/g53tj.

devices had been sold by 2005, and 88 million are predicted by 2010. That means more and more people are heading out, powering up, and occasionally looking around to find a unique outdoor spot that is far—sometimes very far—off the beaten path.

Back in the Arapaho National Forest, we avoid the 20-foot ledge by choosing an easier route, and start climbing again, following the unwavering arrow on Kerski's GPS. Whatever else it may be, confluence hunting is definitely good exercise: Our 3-mile trek has already taken us up and over

10,000-foot Blue Ridge and across a series of thigh-burning hills. We trudge on, stopping occasionally to catch our breath, as the distance to the confluence winds down.

"So, do you feel centered?" Kerski asks when we finally arrive. Oddly enough, I do. The spot itself isn't particularly noteworthy—a slope of tall pines flanked by identical-looking hillsides. But in a geographic sense, it's unique—an organized node overlaying the chaos of the natural world. It's nice to know exactly where you stand, even if it's still technically nowhere.

I watch as Kerski starts shuffling around again, his head bent over his Magellan as he mutters "Oh, oh, oh" and calls out longitude readings to tenths of a second. "Just doing the confluence dance," he explains, and I imagine a cell-phone caller frantically searching for that elusive second bar. Finally he lands on the exact point where his receiver "zeros out"

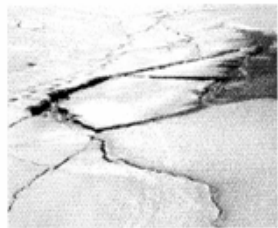
looking for something to do with their gadgets. Before long, they launched confluence.org, and a community of battery-powered grid-seekers was born.

Today, this volunteer-run project attracts all kinds of participants, from vacationing families to professional cartographers, digital gearheads, and backcountry explorers. GPS sales are booming, growing 100 percent a year; 18 million

at 40°00'00"N 106°00'00"W. We're officially centered for the first time all day.

But even as we celebrate, the convergence slips away. A satellite orbiting 12,000 miles above us slides over the horizon and Kerski's GPS loses its position. "C'mon, baby!" he cries, resuming his dance as the pine branches overhead sway in the breeze. ☺

DANGER SIGNS
THIN ICE



A backcountry shortcut crosses a frozen lake. Should you take it? Only with caution. Traversing ice is never completely safe, even on subzero days. If you must cross, these tips will help you identify thin ice and pick the smartest path.

- >> Brick-thick New, clear ice thicker than 4 inches is normally safe for walking. Check thickness by punching a hole with a tent stake or multitool. Don't trust old or refrozen ice, which appears cloudy, cracked, and honeycombed, and can be dangerously rotten.
- >> Warm snap? Gauge ice safety by recent temperature trends, not by the calendar date or current temps. A few warm days in mid-January can open holes in previously thick slabs.
- >> Current check Avoid narrow channels, lake runoffs, and the outside edges of river bends—all places where fast-flowing water is slower to freeze.
- >> Hot zones Icebound objects such as weeds, logs, and rocks absorb daytime heat and weaken the ice that surrounds them.

MAKE IT OUT ALIVE FOR TIPS ON HOW TO SURVIVE IMMERSION IN ICE-COLD WATER, SEE THE SPECIALIST, PAGE 44

PHOTO BY PAGE FALK. TEXT BY LESLEY SUPPES (DANGER SIGNS)