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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 fir, 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.
A geographer with the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver, Kerksi has been hunting confluence points for 6 years, he's visited more than 100 of them. And he's not alone in his obsession. Kerksi 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 high-priority 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, Kerksi has been known to make detours to notch new finds. "One of my great thrills was in England," he says. "I visited a cottage where the very source of the Thames flows." While backpackers typically seek summits like Mount Marcy and solitude, confluence hunters get excited about more absolute matters like longitudinal minutes. "The line was just so beautiful," Kerksi says, 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 set against the scenery—like the one we're hiking in now. "You get to see places you wouldn't normally go to," Kerksi says, surveying the mountain terrain. "If I ever return up missing on a hike," he jokes, "my wife will start searching at the nearest confluence." Kerksi is one of 9000 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 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 geeks, and backcountry explorers. GPS sales are booming, growing 100 percent a year; 18 million 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 unassuming arrow on Kerksi'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?" Kerksi 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 hillysides. 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 Kerksi 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 checking 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" 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 Kerksi's GPS loses its position. "Canon, baby!" he cries, resume his dance as the pine branches overhead sway in the breeze.

> 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 refined 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 banks—all places where fast-flowing water is shallow to freeze.
> Hot zones: Here objects such as axeheads, logs, and rocks absorb daytime heat and weaken the ice that surrounds them.