

GPS On The Trail

So why bother anyway?

On a well-marked, well-traveled route like the Colorado Trail -- and already equipped with topo maps, excellent CT guide-books and a compass -- why carry the extra weight of a GPS receiver (and those spare batteries for it)? After all, your map and compass skills really are second to none. And it truly is fun to unfold, read and re-fold a paper map in a howling wind on an exposed ridge with thunderheads looming to try to figure out which fork to follow at an unmarked junction. *You've* never awakened from a trail-trudging reverie to suddenly realize you can't recall spotting a CT marker for a while and try to overcome that nagging feeling that you should be climbing to a pass rather than descending into a valley. Not you.

I knew that the technology had turned the corner to mainstream acceptance when CT Board member Bill Bloomquist...he of the antique, external-frame Kelty pack...revealed recently that he had acquired his first GPS receiver. This occurred while XC-skiing in a white-out on Rabbit Ears Pass as we reached a decision, based on a GPS bearing, that it was indeed the right place to head down-slope and return to the trailhead.

Your trail, the Colorado Trail, is easily the most advanced long trail in the country in the adoption of GPS for mapping and navigation aids. Thanks to the leadership of the Board and thousands of hours of volunteer effort, the CT enables GPS-equipped users to easily obtain a comprehensive set of navigational waypoints for use on the trail. These are available for download from the web, in [The Trailside Databook](#) publication or from the CT's electronic map package. With such an impressive array of resources there's simply no excuse for getting lost along the CT, unless of course you want to.

A "waypoint", by the way, is a geographic coordinate for a specific location of interest: a trail junction, campsite, water source or the like. A GPS receiver can be loaded with waypoints either manually or by download from a PC. Waypoints organized sequentially form a route, like a series of invisible cairns along the trail. Since a GPS receiver always knows exactly (to within a few meters) where it is, it can easily and automatically calculate the bearing and distance to any waypoint stored in its memory. So it is that we knew with confidence in that white-out that it was time to descend. So you might also know: how far to the campsite, which fork to follow, or the bearing and distance to that reliable water source -- just off the trail -- where you can refill those empty bottles.

Essential? No. But very handy indeed. For safety: in an emergency you can communicate your exact location to rescue personnel (they use GPS extensively). To help the CT: use your GPS to record the coordinates of trail damage and report the exact location to the office. For exploration: record a quick waypoint then go ahead and bushwack up that ridge (to see what's on the other side); the GPS will point you back to where you left the trail. To impress your friends: discuss the relative merits of the lat/long versus UTM coordinate systems for CT navigation...not.

If you don't already have a GPS receiver, you're likely to get one with your next new cell phone. By 2005, FCC regulations require that all new cell phones sold in the U.S. must have at least rudimentary GPS capability. Why wait though? By then you may be ready to relegate your compass to the same drawer where you keep that old slide-rule to show the grandkids. Keep the Kelty handy though, they really are better.