



Water and Food Caching

The Desert Trail was the first time we ever cached water or food. We learned a fair bit during the process and I thought I'd share what we learned.

I think it's safe to say that California can't be hiked without water caches. You would have consistent 50+ mile water carries and two 100 mile carries in Death Valley. I guess technically it's possible but you'd be crazy to do that. Nevada has more reliable natural water. We cached through Lovelock (I-80) since we were hiking that in the Fall and had no idea how long the springs would hold out. It turns out they held out quite well, but it was still nice to have the caches in between. Without caches the carries are shorter than in California, but still solid. You could go to my water chart, remove the caches and see miles in between to decide for yourself.

From Lovelock north to the end of the original DT (Highway 78, or go a little further to Drinkwater Pass) you could continue to cache water and food, but we didn't. It wasn't really necessary, although a couple of food caches for 2 very long carries would have been nice (about 150 miles each).

I think we did what would become “average” or “popular” if anyone else were to hike the DT. We basically did what was needed using only passenger car accessible roads and still had some solid water carries. If we had a high clearance 4wd vehicle we could have done a lot more caches which would have taken more time but also could have been really nice.

The previous 2 hikers took different approaches. Colter did a ton of caches. His hike in 2012 was the first and since he had very little reliable water information I imagine he over-cached just to make sure. I believe he did something like 40 caches for the first 1,000 miles which is one cache every 25 miles or almost a cache per day or 1.25 days. He then took 2 weeks off, collected all of his previous cache garbage/ammo cans and laid more caches north from Lovelock to Highway 78 or so I believe. There is one

huge benefit to this, he was carrying way less than we were at times which I'm sure made things a lot more enjoyable at times. But it was also a lot of work with a 4wd vehicle. Dirmonger basically did the opposite and seemingly only barely cached in California. It seems like in hindsight he might have cached more if he had known a heatwave was going to be following him. He did not cache in Nevada at all. He also hikes twice as fast as we do.

If I had to do it again I'm torn. If I had a high clearance 4wd vehicle I might do more like 30+ caches to shorten some of the bigger carries. But we got by just fine the way we did it too. We did 17 caches between the Mexico border and Lovelock, I've got these as waypoints on my mapset. We basically cached water at every possible road that was paved or graded dirt as far as we knew. This still left some pretty solid water carries but looking at maps there wasn't a way to shorten them without a high clearance 4wd vehicle. Our road trip consisted of renting a small SUV, driving south from Lovelock dropping off the caches down to Mexico and then driving all the way back to Reno to return the car. This was like 1,800 miles of driving! It took us about 4 days to do the caches and then a day to drive back. It was very tiring but fun.

Here's a few random thoughts and tips from our caching expedition:

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We buried all of our caches just like Colter. They were going to be out there for up to 3 months and given that each cache was critical we didn't want to chance it. I would highly recommend this. We only had one cache with any evidence it had been touched, maybe a coyote had scratched at it and a little of the garbage bag was showing. That's it.

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You will want a real shovel to dig holes. The ground varied from sandy and soft to very hard and rocky. We had no issues digging up the holes with our hands months later, once the hole was dug and the ground broken it wasn't an issue.

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We carried a light pair of gardening gloves with us so when we were digging them up by hand we wouldn't get our hands filthy. We also carried a tiny pair of decent scissors to cut up the jugs when done. We didn't want

to return to pick up all our cache trash so we carried everything out with us. My strategy was to cut the top off a bottle and then cut up all the other bottles and stuff them inside the one open top jug and put that jug into my back mesh. Heather's strategy was to cut up all the bottles into pieces that would fit into a quart size ziplock and put that in her pack or mesh.

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We buried our caches in light kitchen garbage bags thinking this would keep everything from getting filthy but it actually didn't matter. The bags would rip while trying to pull them out of the hole and things would get dirty anyway and then we also had to carry more trash out. We buried one cache without bags and I was surprised it was fine, I pulled the bottles out and shook off the dirt no problem. I wouldn't use bags again.

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We used large Opsaks for the food caches. These worked great. They are quite huge and we usually fit both our food for 3-4 days into a bag (although Heather doesn't carry a lot of food and we made sure to buy non-bulky things, like no chips). I don't know how they would work in bear country but in the desert there isn't much to dig them up and we had no issues. Supposedly they are odor proof. We then could just carry the bags out rather than come back to get our plastic buckets or ammo cans.

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No matter how big a hole you dig it will never seem deep enough! It was funny, I would dig and dig and dig and then when I dropped all the water in and reburied it, the top of the cache was at most just a few inches below the surface. This seemed fine but the deeper the better I suppose.

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In addition to water and occasionally trail food, we each added a can of soda for a special treat. And then at every cache I also added a can of ravioli and a can of fruit cocktail. Weirdly for me the can of diet coke I usually love wasn't that great but the ravioli and fruit became huge favorites. I did have to carry the empty cans out and the weight of all the empty bottles and cans would feel kinda heavy. Maybe 1/3 of the time we were able to pass off our empty cache stuff to a passing vehicle.

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Don't use cheap gallon water jugs! Make sure you use the gallon Crystal Geyser bottles. Or possibly the gallon Arrowhead jugs I think. The gallon milk type water jugs you can buy cheaply at a grocery store will almost definitely leak on you! This is a thing I didn't know about but I had done 2 caches down in SoCal before our plans got rearranged and when we went back to cache more water 5 months later, both caches with these cheap jugs had leaked underground. Something about how the seams are done and then the heat and cold expands and contracts them over and over. We had zero issues with the Crystal Geyser bottles and if you google it, you'll see the Arizona Trail Association talks about this too.

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Do many things to make sure you can find your cache later! We took GPS coordinates, took notes as to exactly how many steps from the road or a unique bush, added a tiny piece of orange flagging tape around the nearest bush, put a rock cairn on top of the hole and then took pictures. But we were lazy about the pictures and that almost caused us a lot of problems once. We had one cache overtaken by a flash flood (really we think a well flooded the area) and it swept away our rock cairn and our reburied hole which usually after months still looked different than the surrounding area, looked the same as everything else. We knew exactly what bush we buried it next to (flagging tape was still on and GPS was correct) but we didn't know exactly where to dig. I dug with my hands and a rock everywhere around that bush and couldn't find it! Finally we noticed in a picture the small cairn and I dug in that area and found our cache had dropped like a foot in the flood and was really deep! So make sure you take a good picture of what side of the bush the hole is so if you arrive and your cairn is gone you'll know where to dig.

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I'd suggest trying to dig your hole at least a little ways from the road. We were worried someone would come across our cairn and different looking dirt and be like, hmm, treasure! This never happened but who knows.