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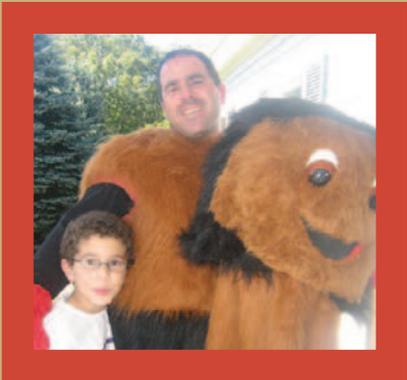
# Carolina Mountain Life

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## Prognosticating Worm Stars In Namesake Festival

By Michael J. Solender



**L**ions, tigers and bears most people get. Panthers, Gamecocks and even Cubs are easily understood. But a worm? A spineless invertebrate (sorry for the redundancy) that spends half its life curled up in a ball avoiding Robins or Blue Jays, what kind of mascot can a worm be?

It turns out if you're from Banner Elk, North Carolina, the worm, or more precisely the Woolly Worm is a mascot extraordinary. It is not only a tremendous ambassador of good will and worldwide recognition for the small Avery County burgh, but a prognosticator of winter weather for mountain folks that has trumped even the most sophisticated and high tech meteorological equipment known to man. The furry little cocktail-sausage-with-legs has been the star of his own festival that draws upwards of 20,000 people to Banner Elk the third weekend in October for more than 35 years.

What started as a handful of town folk getting together to consult the almanac-like powers of the woolly worm according to Grandfather Mountain folklore, has evolved like a caterpillar emerging from a chrysalis as a beautiful moth, with grander and more expansive features each and every year.

### Uncanny accuracy

The main attraction is the annual race that not only garners thousands of dollars for local charities but identifies the winning worm who, by color alone will predict with uncanny accuracy the area weather forecast for the entire 13 week winter season. Festival organizers note that the predictions—which come months in advance of winter—have proven more than 87 percent accurate far beating any meteorologists.

So says long-time Banner Elk resident Roy Krege, 71. Krege is no ordinary town booster but bears the self-appointed title of Mr. Woolly Worm, a badge of honor that has no equal in these parts. "I've been around since the inception of the festival and seen it take off in popularity," said Krege. "A great part of the appeal for folks is we have so many different activities from crafts and food to especially the main event, the races."

The "races" of course are the worm races or the central focal point of the entire festival. Here is where participants take individual woolly worms and coax them onto a 42" piece of string that is held vertically in place upon a linear "race track." The competitor that can get his or her worm to the top of the string in the shortest amount of time is declared the winner and some significant prize money, bragging rights and fame

await. Krege is quick to point out that while the rules allow for yelling, hollerin' and foot stompin', there is no touching allowed to encourage the fuzzy critters up the string.

"Many different strategies are employed," said Krege in describing how participants encourage their worms. "Some folks have taken to blowing hot air through straws on critters' backsides. Of course there are plenty of folks with hot air up here so that isn't always a competitive advantage."

After several trials and heats, the main event declares a grand prize winner where the payout is \$1000. The real prize however is having your worm "read" by the judging committee who looks over the worm and each of its individual 13 "segments"—one for each week during the winter months. Krege noted that the color of each segment will predict temperature, frosts and even snowfall according to a prognostication formula that has been honed over time.

### Prayer as a strategy

"One of my favorite stories surrounding the races," said Krege, "Was one year when a young man's worm seemed to stall on his way up the string to the point where the boy could actually be heard to say a small prayer. Whether it was divine inspiration or not, the moment the boy's

prayers were finished, they were answered as that worm took off for the top and became that year's winner."

While Krege as Mr. Woolly Worm with his pink pants, goofy hat and emblems and memorabilia from festivals past gets to yak and yuck it up with festival goers, his sidekick Merryweather, a six foot five inch fully costumed, woolly mascot, is more the strong, silent type.

For years, Krege's wife, Marion, had the honor and served silently alongside her husband at parades, gatherings and of course the annual festival. These days it is a relative newcomer to the Banner Elk community who has taken a special shine to the role of the festival's name-sake mascot.

### Merryweather

Adam Binder, 41, and his family moved to Banner Elk in 2009 after vacationing there for several seasons. "It is a wonderful community and after coming here, participating in the festival, I changed one of my lifelong goals", said Binder. "At one point I thought I wanted to move to a small town and become mayor, but I came to realize I really wanted Roy's job as Mr. Woolly Worm."

Binder good-naturedly took on the "in-training" role of Merryweather four years ago and has never looked back.

The costume complete with head, body and feet can be quite warm so Binder makes certain to hydrate (but not too much or there is that OTHER problem) and take periodic breaks. But like the stalwarts at Disneyworld, his goal is to never have children see him out of costume.

One of the most challenging aspects of the role is not being able to speak. "I have to do a lot of gesturing and hugging," said Binder, who indicated he has been photographed more than 4000 times in the past 5 years. "The crazy thing about that is underneath the costume I make sure to smile for the photo each and every time."

You can be sure to know that Merryweather is not the only one smiling!

For more information: Banner Elk Woolly Worm Festival  
October 19 & 20, 2013 Downtown Banner Elk, NC  
[www.woollyworm.com](http://www.woollyworm.com) 800-972-2183

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## THE WORM SPEAKS:

### Merryweather The Mascot Weighs In On The Trials & Tribulations Of Being A Celebrity

He's the tall, striped, silent type in public, but Merryweather has feelings and, it turns out, he can be quite opinionated! From the worm himself:

- All the attention goes to Mr. Woolly Worm, Roy Krege, and he is not even a Woolly Worm.

- We (worms) do all the work.

- We climb the strings in each race; no prize or pin for us!

- All the times we travel to promote the festival do you know how often I have been thrown in Mr. Woolly Worm's trunk?

- The celebrity bit is great, but sometimes it's a bit much. I can't just go out and do a simple parade. If a parade takes thirty minutes, it takes me an hour. I have to stop and pose for pictures and hug babies! I must make my fans happy.

- I can't just ride on a float like Sugar Bear or Yosef the ASU Mountaineer. No, Mr. Woolly Worm and I WALK the entire parade route and stop for everyone who asks for a photo or a handshake.

- It is a difficult responsibility. Many times I encounter a scared child—what do I do? Do I try to get the child to calm down and realize I am nice and soft and cuddly and nothing to be scared of, or do I cut my losses and just move on without making things worse? Nobody realizes the emotional stress these situations cause ME. I have to live with the fact that I scared a little child. It keeps me up at night thinking of the little kids I have scared. Sure there are thousands more who hug me and are happy, but it is the others that I think of.

- When I am out with Mr. Woolly Worm, HE does all the talking. I just stand, wave, and look cute and cuddly. No sound bites from me, and I have lots to say!

- Since I am the Festival mascot, I am not allowed to actually participate in the woolly worm races. What I would give to be able to participate in the races and maybe one year win and predict the winter weather!

- When I am asked to participate in parades and events in the middle of the summer it can be very uncomfortable. With my size and the amount of fur I have it is quite hazardous for me to be out in the Summer months for hours at a time. Most of my relatives are hibernating in the cool soil of the forests or have gotten rid of their fur and have transformed into moths—but not me.