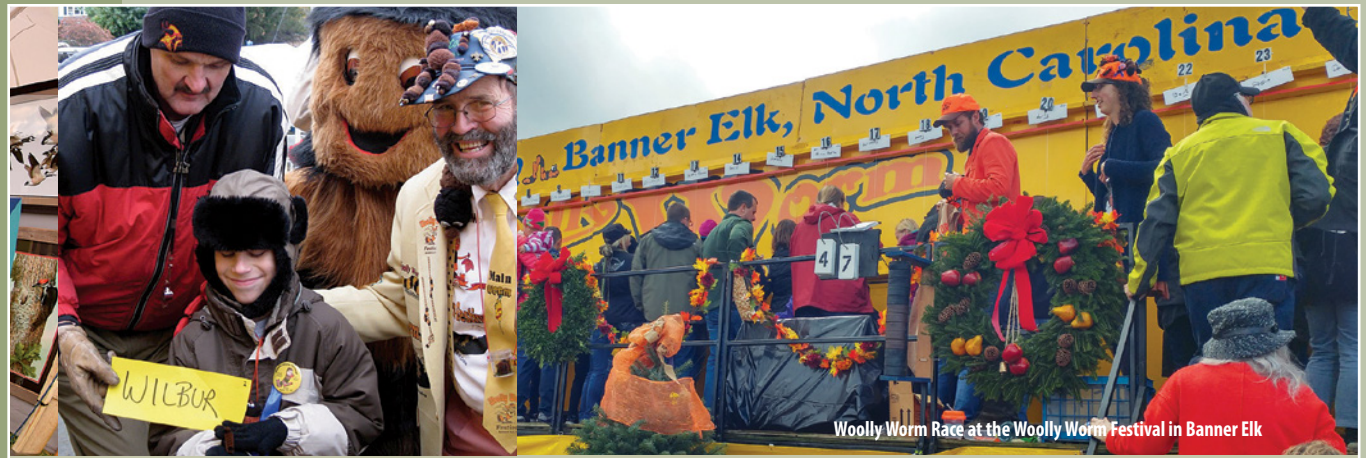




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Woolly Worm Race at the Woolly Worm Festival in Banner Elk

## Annual Woolly Worm Festival...44 Years and Counting

Let's imagine it's the late 1970s. You've been invited to attend a Banner Elk town meeting for the purpose of forming an official merchants' association.

During that meeting, you (we'll call you "Jim"), suggest an annual event to help boost the community's tourism profile and tourism dollars. "Great idea! Any suggestions for an event?" local leaders ask.

So, you stand up and say something like, "As a matter of fact, I do!" At that point you begin to describe an event in which people take a bunch of fuzzy "worms" and try to race them uphill on a skinny string while yelling wildly for a winner. You call it the "Woolly Worm Festival."

Now, if you didn't also happen to be Jim Morton of the beloved Grandfather Mountain Morton family, they may not have taken you seriously. But you were. And they did.

So, why a Woolly Worm festival? In short, Morton had been researching about how autumn's woolly worms (Isabella Tiger Moth caterpillars) had a reputation for predicting winter weather via the degree of black and brown coloring on their 13-segment bodies.

And, since Morton was also familiar with Pennsylvania's world-famous Groundhog Day festival starring "Punxsutawney Phil," he suggested a similar event, only substituting the woolly worm for the groundhog.

There was one problem, however. In some cases, the caterpillars' predominant colors varied from worm to worm. So, instead, he suggested holding a race with worms climbing up a three-foot length of twine. The worm that made it to the top first would become that year's official

winter weather prognosticator. And that's pretty much how the annual autumn Banner Elk Woolly Worm Festival began.

The first year's event in 1978 drew a modest crowd. But, thanks to regional and national TV news coverage and a lot of local support, it has grown to attract up to 20,000 festival goers annually.

Woolly Worm is held on the grounds of the Historic Banner Elk School each third weekend in October and is co-sponsored by the Banner Elk Kiwanis Club and Avery County Chamber of Commerce. This year's event falls on **Saturday and Sunday, October 16-17.**

"We have a hundred or more volunteers each year," noted Avery County Chamber of Commerce Director, Anne Winkelman. "Volunteers come from Chamber members, our Kiwanis Club co-sponsor members, the Civil Air Patrol and community supporters. Festival planning is a year-round project. In fact, we'll get applications for next year during this year's festival," Winkelman added.

But, of course, there's much more to the Woolly Worm Festival than caterpillar races. The two-day festival includes a rich variety of 160 to 175 craft and food vendors, rides, live music and entertainment, plus a host of children's activities to assure a fun time for all ages. And no one knows that better than Kiwanis' own Mary Jo Brubaker, official Chairperson of the festival.

"I've been involved in the festival for at least 14 years and Chairperson for eight," Brubaker recalled. "My main reason for being involved is how the festival benefits the community. In fact, Lees-McRae did a study a few years back estimating a three

million dollar economic impact on this area. But the best part for me is how all the proceeds go straight back towards improving the lives and schools of Avery County children, for boosting local tourism and for encouraging community economic development," Brubaker added.

Festival goers are always excited to see "Merryweather," the giant Woolly Worm mascot, mingling with the crowd. And all anxiously await Saturday's official weather prediction from the winning worm announced by the "worm whisperer," Tommy Burleson.

But, of course, there is another local celebrity who's been synonymous with the event. And that's the original Mr. Woolly Worm himself, Roy Krege. "I started announcing the second year of the festival and came up with a special shirt from Don Iverson's t-shirt shop. My wife, Marion, found a colorful pair of pants and Don added decals. I was declared 'Mr. Woolly Worm' for 39 years," recalled Krege.

His role was to call the races, announce the winners, and award Saturday's \$1,000 prize and Sunday's \$500 prize. "That was always the highlight for me," added Krege.

After Krege retired in 2016, Jason DeWitt, Adam Binder and Shawn Stricklen have admirably shared the Mr. Woolly Worm role. But all will admit that Roy Krege made Mr. Woolly Worm a legendary festival icon. And all will gratefully honor the memory of Jim Morton for his crazy idea about creating a festival around a fuzzy worm climbing a string.

[www.woollyworm.com](http://www.woollyworm.com) and [www.averycounty.com](http://www.averycounty.com).