

Travel

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SPAM JAM



TEXAS MOSQUITO FESTIVAL



BYRON DAZEY

PORTLAND PIRATE FESTIVAL



POTATO DAYS FESTIVAL



MOONSHINERS REUNION AND MOUNTAIN MUSIC FESTIVAL

CELEBRATE THE Zany

Across the country,
weird meets wild
at annual festivals

By Kari Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

At some point over the next year, somewhere across the country, someone will play a game of horseshoes with a toilet seat, engage in a sword fight, eat a bowl of chili made with a fire ant, build a castle out of potatoes, or dress up their dog as an alien. And hundreds, if not thousands, of people will show up to watch or participate. We've highlighted a dozen wacky, weird, or otherworldly festivals happening throughout the year:

Brick by brick

Thousands of LEGO-loving people gather in northern Virginia each August for **BrickFair**, the nation's largest LEGO festival. The event, sponsored by a group known as Adult Fans of LEGO, offers workshops on how to make gi-

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YELLOW PINE HARMONICA CONTEST AND FESTIVAL



BRICKFAIR LEGO FAN FESTIVAL



WHOOPIE PIE FESTIVAL



ROSWELL UFO FESTIVAL

From mosquitoes to moonshine, plan to party

► FESTIVALS

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ant castle walls, for instance, or how to incorporate rock formations, foliage, and waterways in your LEGO landscapes.

You can also attend a robot sumo wrestling competition, when computerized LEGO robots grapple in the ring; watch stop-motion animated LEGO films; or play LEGO bingo. Close to 1,000 exhibitors display their elaborate creations: train layouts, tall buildings, towns, futuristic battle scenes, and space displays, all made out of the small plastic bricks. This year, you'll even see a Boeing 777 airplane that's built with 110,000 LEGOs, measures 9½ feet long, and has operational navigation, beacon warning, runway, landing, and cabin lights.

Shiver me timbers!

Bring your parrot and eye patch to Oregon in September for the annual **Portland Pirate Festival**. You'll witness cannon and sword fight shows, historical reenactments, music by the pirate punk band the Dreadnoughts, and entertainment by jugglers, gypsies, and other scallywags.

Take a hands-on class on historically accurate weapons like arming swords and rapiers, and meet blacksmith Jim Rich, who forged the knives carried by Jack Sparrow (played by Johnny Depp) in all three "Pirates of the Caribbean" films. The festival earned the Guinness World Record for "the most pirates gathered in one place" in 2009, when it drew 1,670 buccaneers. Help the festival reclaim the record this year (it was broken by England's Brixham Pirate Festival in May).

Backcountry humor

More than 5,000 people turn out for the **Summer Redneck Games** in East Dublin, Ga., in July. This festival, known as a "mecca for mullets," features a watermelon seed-spitting contest, redneck horseshoes using toilet seats instead of horseshoes, an armpit serenade challenge, and a mud pit belly flop contest, when contestants plunge into a pool of water mixed with Georgia red clay to see who can splash the most viewers.

"It started as a spinoff of the 1996 Olympic Games," in Atlanta, says Larry Drew, East Dublin city administrator. "We all thought it would just fizzle out after a few years, but it's been going on for 16 years now."

You can sample rattlesnake, alligator kabob, funnel cake, and other "redneck fare."

Hold that tune

The sleepy mountain hamlet of Yellow Pine, Idaho, 150 miles north of Boise, swells from 40 residents to upwards of 3,500 people in August during the annual **Yellow Pine Harmonica Contest and Festival**. Amateur and professional harmonica players from around the world gather to entertain and compete in the town that bills itself as "the harmonica capital of the western world."

"It's self-regulating because there aren't any Hiltons around and you have to like camping," says festival chairman Steve Holloway. "We have just one general store, one restaurant, a bar, and a lodge."

Your campsite will overlook high mountains and the East Fork of the South Fork of the Salmon River. When you're not taking in the toe-tapping music, go whitewater rafting, fishing, or hiking in the wilderness.

Swat team

Clute, Texas, located 44 miles south of Galveston, attracts 15,000 people and a whole lot of skeeters during the **Great Texas Mosquito Festival** the last weekend in July. This 30-year-old event, sponsored by Dow Chemical, takes place in a 25-acre, wooded municipal park. It features a mosquito-calling contest; a haystack dive, when kids search for coins in a giant haystack to earn prizes; a washer-pitching contest (as in nuts, bolts, and washers); and music by the Intercoastal Pirates and Trailer Choir (think Beach Boys and Texas country music, respectively).

You'll know you've arrived when you spot what the locals claim is "the world's largest mosquito," a 26-foot-tall inflatable mascot named Willie Man-Chew that's topped by a giant cowboy hat. While in town, visit historic plantation houses, a planetarium, and sandy beaches.



STEPHEN MORTON/GETTY IMAGES

Whether you are a fan of rednecks (like Preston Wright, above) or pirates, there is a festival just for you. The Redneck Games are held in Georgia while the pirates gather in Portland, Ore.



ANGELA BACCI

Annual infestation

Marshall, Texas, pays tribute to another Lone Star pest during the annual **Fire Ant Festival** in October.

"We just decided we have to deal with them so we might as well have fun with them," festival director Connie Fugler says of the stinging red ants.

This "wild and zany" event includes a chili cook-off, when participants create chili dishes that must contain at least one fire ant; a Tour de Fire Ant bike ride; a parade with people dressed as ants and other insects; a Fire Ant Roundup, when participants compete to get as many ants as possible into a one-gallon jug; and a "chicken-chunking" contest, when people see who can throw a packed rubber chicken the farthest. And don't miss the fire ant mating-call contest, which is so popular that Governor Rick Perry entered one year.

Fly away

Texas isn't the only state celebrating pesky critters. The tiny hamlet of Adamant just north of Montpelier, Vt., hosts the **Adamant Blackfly Festival** in May, with music by The Flyswatters and a blackfly pie contest (real flies not included). The event raises money for the Adamant Coop, a small country store in this village of 50 residents that sells everything from bulk grains and artwork to bug bafflers, which are hooded shirts with mesh screens that keep the blackflies at bay.

Shine on

More than 4,000 people show up on a 50-acre farm in New Prospect, S.C., every October for the **Moonshiners Reunion and Mountain Music Festival**. You'll see mock versions of old moonshine stills, including a submarine still and a copper pot still, and perhaps sample more than a dozen varieties of the forbidden corn whiskey.

"The whole reason for doing this is to keep our Southern heritage alive, and moonshining is a big part of Southern heritage," says Debbie Barnwell, who organizes the event with her husband, Barney, on their family's 100-year-old farm.

The event showcases the talents of local bluegrass bands and draws an eclectic crowd.

"We actually have federal agents that come, and we have preachers and doctors and lawyers and your average redneck person," says Barnwell. "It's not about the drink," she adds. "It's about the camaraderie, the music, and the stories."

Sweet treats

There's no shortage of food

festivals nationwide. On the fourth Saturday in June, Dover-Foxcroft hosts the annual **Maine Whoopie Pie Festival** to honor this sweet treat. Amateur and professional bakers from across the state compete for top honors in a whoopie pie contest. You might sample pumpkin, strawberry, chocolate chip, or chocolate-covered whoopie pies.

"The story about the name is that farmers out in the field would open up their lunch boxes and see one and yell, 'Whoopie!'" says festival organizer Patrick Myers.

The event includes a whoopie pie-eating contest for kids of all ages, a whoopie pie song contest, a 3K run so you can burn off some calories, and a chance to meet the official whoopie pie mascot, Sweetie Pie.

Go SPAM crazy

Ever tried SPAM sushi? Or how about SPAM raviolis? Visit the Hawaiian island of Oahu in late April and you can enjoy this canned meat artfully prepared by more than a dozen of Waikiki's top chefs. The **Waikiki SPAM Jam**, a one-day street festival, celebrates Hawaiians' crazy love of SPAM: It's estimated that they consume about 7 million cans of "spiced ham" every year.

"Like potatoes are to the Irish, SPAM is to the Hawaiians," says festival coordinator Karen Winpenny. "You can cook it with pretty much anything. I fry it up with eggs and rice, put teriyaki sauce on top, and eat it for breakfast."

If that doesn't appeal, go to the festival and sink your teeth into SPAM fajitas, french fries, or musubi, which is fried SPAM wrapped in seaweed that's served on a bed of rice. Proceeds from the festival benefit the Hawaiian Food Bank.

Spud city

Potato-prolific Barnesville, Minn., hosts the **Potato Days Festival** each August. This gathering includes a Miss Tater Tot Pageant for girls age 5 and 6, a potato sack fashion show, potato sack races, and potato-carving and sculpting activities, where people build anything from buildings to beach scenes out of spuds.

Mashed potato wrestling highlights the event, when participants grapple in thick potato goo and then get hosed off by the local fire department. You can fill up on all things potato, including pancakes, soup, sausage, dumpings, french fries, and Norwegian lefse, a type of flatbread.

Out of this world

In July 1947, a controversial "flying disk" crashed on a ranch 30 miles north of Roswell, N.M. The local Army unit claimed it

QUITE UNUSUAL

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was nothing more than a weather balloon, but others believed it was an unidentified flying object. Today, the city holds the **Roswell UFO Festival**, drawing everyone from serious scholars who lecture on topics like "Crop Circles: Making Contact" to people dressed as coneheads who doll up their dogs for the Alien Pet Costume Contest.

Bring your pipe cleaners, tin foil, and glitter, and learn how to make alien headgear, visit the International UFO Museum, take in a flick during the Aliens in Cinema Film Festival, attend an ice cream social at the world's only UFO-shaped McDonald's, and shop for alien food and memorabilia at the Galactic Market.

Whatever you fancy, there's probably a festival out there that celebrates it.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

If you go . . .

BrickFair LEGO Fan Festival

240-481-7998
www.brickfair.com

Aug. 7-8, \$10 adults; \$7 10 and under; free 3 and under

Portland Pirate Festival

503-853-1497

www.portlandpiratefestival.com

Sept. 18-19, \$12-\$15 adults, \$6-\$8 ages 3-12, free 2 and under

Summer Redneck Games

478-272-6909

www.summerredneckgames.com

Early July, \$5 per person

Yellow Pine Harmonica Contest and Festival

208-697-7343

www.harmonicacontest.com

Aug. 6-8, free

Great Texas Mosquito Festival

800-371-2971

www.mosquitofestival.com

July 29-31, \$5 Thursday, \$10 Friday-Saturday

Fire Ant Festival

800-953-7868

www.marshalltxchamber.com

Oct. 9, free

Adamant Blackfly Festival

802-223-5760

www.adamantcoop.org

May, free

Moonshiners Reunion and Mountain Music Festival

864-680-0225

www.moonshiners.com

Oct. 1-2, \$25 per day, \$45 weekend pass, includes camping, parking, and all concerts

Maine Whoopie Pie Festival

207-564-8943

www.centertheatre.org/whoopie.html

\$6 adults, \$3 kids, \$15 for a family of 4



ROSWELL UFO FESTIVAL

The Roswell UFO Festival, held in early July in New Mexico, attracts lovers of all things alien.

Waikiki SPAM Jam

808-255-5927

www.spamjamhawaii.com

April 29, free

Potato Days Festival

800-525-4901

potatodays.com

Aug. 27-28, free

Roswell UFO Festival

888-767-3378

www.ufofestivalroswell.com

Early July, free admission, charges for some events

CALIFORNIA LAGOS DAKAR	151 403 475	ACCRA INDIA JOBURG/CAPE	478 510 530
SEATTLE 268	MANCHESTER 305	ITALY 335	BANGKOK 534
FLORIDA 280	AMSTERDAM 305	DUBLIN 338	BAHES SALEM 583
DENVER 283	ISTANBUL 305	TEL AVIV 415	MANILA 586
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