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# Worsts get the best of us

## Rain, snakes and baggers, '09

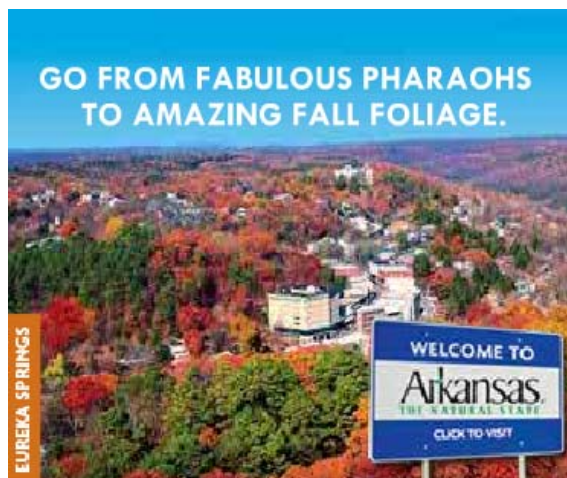
Bob Lancaster  
Updated: 12/31/2009

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**WORST REFRESHMENTS:** A daycare operator at Scott, thinking it was Kool-Aid, served poisonous blue windshield-wiper fluid to 10 children, age 2 to 7, in March. They all survived, but the daycare didn't.

Longtime followers of the Best & Worst of Arkansas might notice that there are



considerably more worsts than bests in the 2009 installment.

That's a departure for this feature, which had its debut more than 30 years ago. In the 20-plus years that I've been putting it together, I've tried to balance the bests and worsts, usually alternating them, first one then the other, a best for every worst, a worst for every best.

It didn't occur to me until this year that that approach represented one of those famous media biases. It promoted a notion that seems to me now to have no justification — that is, that there's an evenness, a consistency, a normalcy in the character of the public life in Arkansas from year to year, decade to decade. We have our bests and worsts, our idiots and our saints, pretty much in the same proportion, a hero for every son-of-a-bitch, and vice versa. A noble or stirring deed for every egregiously stupid or dastardly one.

From those extremes, we can establish a steady middle that we don't have to be ashamed of, even if we can't exactly be proud of it either.

There's comfort in that view — if life here could be better in many respects, it could also be worse; it could be Texas or South Carolina — and there's a certain appealing tidiness in it from the journalism-textbook perspective. It gives you a hopeful place to start the compilation from each January, a template, if you will; what the philosophers call a method.

But while dualities exist in Dickens (best of times, worst of times), they don't exist in nature, and when you run across them, in high places or in tacky little tabloid hebdomadals, they always turn out to be just a contrivance. It might take you a couple of decades to recognize it as a contrivance, but there you are. It's even a contrivance to do the review annually — instead of, say, every five years, like the Central High crisis rehashes. Or every 50 years, like we do war commemorations.

So no year has that true 50-50 balance of bests and worsts, or anywhere near it. A few are honestly happily best-heavy, though most are obliged to fotch a giant anvil of worsts. But the leveling impulse is so strong that it will sometimes put a best mask on a worst in the hope of evening the score. Several of the 2009 bests listed here are imposters of that sort. For example, the Jericho speed trap is entered below as an Arkansas best. A Stuttgart rattlesnake that could swallow grown peccaries is called a best. So is the new state lottery, though it is clearly based on Lucifer's original patent.

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Another perplexity in the annual B & W compilation, much in evidence this year, is how a best or a worst can suddenly morph into its opposite, as particles sometimes do in quantum physics. Two examples from 2009 that come to mind involve rainfall and Mike Huckabee, the former governor.

Blessed rainfall, especially when it comes in moderate quantities following uncomfortable dry spells, which it usually does, is a perennial all-star Arkansas best. But this year it descended on Arkansas in serial deluges. None of these lasted 40 days and 40 nights but it seemed like at least three of them did, washing away three of our non-consecutive months in three different seasons. Washing away livestock, crops, festivals, automobiles with living people in them, unwary squatters on one-holers across a wide mountainous swath, and the uppermost 50 feet of topsoil, down to the magma, in a myriad of suburban yards. It was the same ol' best rainfall, transformed by the amount of it, the wretched excess of it, into a worst.

And Bro.-ex-Gov. Huckabee was tootling along through arguably his best year since 1996, when by coup d'etat Grand Inquisitor Kenneth Starr lifted him up out of hard-won political obscurity and put him on the primrose path. He had a TV talk show, his ghost had speed-written another semi-literate best-seller, he was raking in the shekels (always his priority), he was leading the elephant stampede toward the next potus nom. Everything coming up roses. Then just as the 2009 home stretch hove into view, the Bro.-ex-Gov.'s triumphal annum crashed and burned in the amount of time it took one of his clemenced Jesus-cons to cap a quartet of Washington state policemen. So it goes with the B & W.

I believe there's a reason for the preponderance of worsts this year. People aren't at their bests when the Apocalypse looms. And it has loomed large since 2009's dawning, and it still lurks here in 2009's dusk. You can't expect bests from people who have been unnerved and left unsettled by monumental rascality in their public affairs and further demoralized by this worst-ever infestation of fool demagogues.

You can expect better in 2010, though. The template for it has already been drawn.

### **Worst refreshments**

A daycare operator at Scott, thinking it was Kool-Aid, served poisonous blue windshield-wiper fluid to 10 children, age 2 to 7, in March. They all survived. The day-care didn't.

### **Worst cheatin' bastards**

The football Razorbacks beat the No. 1 ranked Florida Gators at Gainesville in October, but a series of bad late calls by the refs let Florida "win" the game and stay atop the BCS heap. Howls from the Hog faithful still reverberate. Same ref crew had a track record of pisspooor or corrupt game-changing calls, and the sapsuckers were laid off at midseason as punishment.

### **Best Remedy for Arkies Who Wanted to Throw Away \$1.3 Million a Day and Couldn't Figure Out How**

Ticket sales for the new state scholarship lottery began in September. Long lines at all the outlets.

### **Worst raw**



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On a raw night in Searcy in January, during a sleet storm, a naked man, thought to be intoxicated, crashed his motorcycle into a parked state police car. He left the scene, had to be chased down and defrosted before he was taken in.

### **Worst specter**

State GOP chairman Doyle Webb of Benton warned in May that if voters keep electing Democrats to the legislature, the prospect looms of a lesbian takeover of state budgeting.

### **Worst takeout**

A man and woman were arrested in Jonesboro in July after threatening Wendy's employees with a gun for having failed to put drinking straws in their to-go order.

### **Worst cotton pony rustle**

Thieves in Conway in October broke into a storage facility and made off with \$474,000 worth of Kotex.

### **Worst spin**

A Texas man who bought a \$1.3-million Bugatti sports car in Jonesboro in November drove it off into a salt-water marsh near Galveston on his way home.

### **Worst tapdance**

A habitual criminal might've been harmlessly rotting away in the Arkansas state penitentiary in November, instead of out in Washington State murdering policemen by the bunch, if in 2000 then-Gov. Mike Huckabee hadn't commuted his 108-year prison term, cutting it by more than half and making him eligible for immediate parole. Huck response to questions of why was the old Wayne Dumond softshoe all over again. Presidential prospects dimmed noticeably.

### **Worst easy come, easy go**

A Fort Smith convenience store clerk cashed the first \$100,000 winning ticket in the new state lottery in October. But he collected just before he was to be arraigned on a drug charge, and a circuit judge, upon learning of the windfall, ordered him to dismiss his free court-appointed defense attorney and use the lottery money to hire one of the kind that you have to pay.

### **Best arms**

Benton and North Little Rock squared off against one another in Game 5 of the World Series in November. It was the first time ever that two Arkie starting pitchers faced each other in a series game. Cliff Lee for the Phillies, A.J. Burnett for the Yankees. Lee won this particular match-up.

### **Worst revival**

The cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock and the North Little Rock School District promoted and helped stage – with public employees, facilities and equipment – a two-day Christian revival on North Little Rock's riverfront in October. Your tax dollars at work.

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**Worst grooming**

Arkansas ranks No. 1 among the states in the percentage of men who have been married three or more times. We're only No. 2 among the states for women in the same category. The Pew Research Center announced the numbers in October. Among other things, they supposedly suggest that the more marrying you do, the less education you have.

**Worst family tradition**

The Arkansas Leader reported in October the arrest, on a charge of raping a minor, of a Cabot businessman who had been named a year earlier by the Lonoke County Republican Committee as its Man of the Year. The honoree's son was already in prison, serving a 23-year term, also as a minor-raper.

**Worst packers**

The Fort Smith blogger DBI noted in October the debut of a Facebook friends group called Arkansas Pastors for Concealed Carry.

**Worst you know Cabot**

No surprise that Cabot took the lead among Arkansas schools in boycotting a televised speech to American school students in September in which President Obama urged youngsters to stay in school, study hard, and behave themselves. It wasn't the president's message that they minded so much up there in the state's Fergit Hell capital. It was just – well, you know Cabot so you know what it was.

**Best you know Bryant**

In its August issue, Money magazine chose Bryant (pop. 14,700) as No. 86 on its list of the top 100 places to live in the United States. The magazine was rather vague in saying why it chose Bryant for the honor, mainly citing it as a, um, “traditional All-American community,” which, if you know Bryant, is code for – well, you know what it's code for.

**Best news if you're a police dog**

Thanks to a \$4,000 gift from the North Little Rock Moose Lodge, Little Rock police dogs in September got bullet-proof vests.

**Worst guest**

A Texas woman was arrested at Magnolia in March on charges stemming from having started a drunken brawl at a wake.

**Worst tunnel**

In these belt-tightening, penny-pinching times, the Legislative Council in September approved building a 100-foot pedestrian tunnel costing \$28,000 a foot to connect state legislators' offices in the State Capitol with staff offices in the building next door. Gov. Beebe holds the purse-strings, though, and isn't tunnel-friendly.

**Best days**

The last three days of September were among the prettiest since the world was created in 6006 B.C.

Also, the entire first week of November.

And Thanksgiving.

### **Best takehome**

Figures released in November showed that Arkansas ranked 46th among the states in per capita income in 2008 at \$32,000, about \$8,000 less than the national average. It was our best showing in more than 50 years.

### **Best production line**

A Fort Smith woman found out in June that she was carrying two babies, one conceived three weeks before the other. Can you continue that spacing until you've got a nice little production line chugging along?

### **Worst passing**

Little Rock learned in August of the death in 2006 in Alabama of Joe Farmer, who for several years was a familiar usually genial homeless man haunting streetcorners here, only occasionally recognizing his former newspaper colleagues and fellow disturbed Vietnam vets among the passersby who sometimes tried to help him and more often went out of their way to avoid him. He drifted off to Birmingham, got even crazier and grosser, and was murdered on the street for no apparent reason, as often happens with the homeless. We're all characters in Joe's story. Passersby passing by.

### **Worst soreheads**

Birthers, deathers, baggers, tenters, and other yellor agitators staged a national disruption campaign in August and September to shout down public policy discussions of pending health-care legislation, and to terrify easily-terrified members of Congress slated to vote on that legislation. At one point, Sen. Blanche Lincoln correctly called the tactics of these dupes and hooligans "un-American," but backed off and weenied out when they began casting squinty eyes in her direction.

### **Best reason to avoid Ozark if you are or have small fry**

Called to a family disturbance in Ozark in November, a policeman there tasered a 10-year-old girl who was said to be misbehaving.

### **Worst Boo at the Zoo**

Does the Weh of Wehco qualify?

### **Best reason never to go to Jericho**

As of September, tiny Jericho (pop. 174) in Crittenden County was supporting no less than seven law enforcement officers, apparently by having them hand out \$150 traffic tickets pretty much 7/24. The Jericho speed trap might never have come to international notice except that one day in August all seven speed-ticket writers converged on the fire chief, and one of them shot him in the back, when he returned to court to protest having

received a ticket just after he left court where he'd protested having received an earlier ticket. Officer who shot him – not charged.

### **Best reason never to go back to Stuttgart**

A photo that made the Internet rounds in August showed a rattlesnake that was said to have been killed after it crawled up into somebody's front yard in Stuttgart. About the length and girth of a standard utility pole. Bound to be at least one more where that one came from.

### **Best practice**

The tasing of a 10-year-old girl by an Ozark policeman twarn't nothin' exceptional, the Ozark authorities said. Shoot fire, a short time before the same officer had tasered a woman thought to be pregnant.

### **Best place to raise children**

Business Week magazine said in November that Springdale was the best town in Arkansas for raising children. Maybe so. At least Springdale police don't taser 10-year-old girls.

### **Best name**

An expectant Smackover woman tried in August to auction on eBay naming rights to her seventh child, setting the minimum bid at \$150. An Arkansas Blog wag suggested she could get \$96,000 just by proposing to name the young'un Senator John Ensign R-AZ Jr.

### **Third Worst unhappy**

A Gallup poll in August showed Hawaii as the state in which residents are happiest and have the strongest sense of well-being. Arkansas ranked better than only two other states, West Virginia and Kentucky, in puny, gloomy residents with low self-esteem.

### **Best idol**

Kris Allen, 23, of Conway, a UCA student and assistant church music minister, won the American Idol talent contest on Fox-TV in May. He beat out a gay guy from the Midwest somewhere. They were both singers. Viewers allegedly cast 100 million votes in the contest.

### **Best riddance**

It was said to mark the end of legal loan-sharking in Arkansas when the state's last payday-lending firm went out of business in July.

It was announced in September by the Boll Weevil Eradication Foundation that 103 years after its arrival the legendary cotton pest has departed from Arkansas.

*(This raises the question whether UA-Monticello needs a new mascot – still agriculturally related, of course. If so, we suggest something on the order of Mississippi Delta State's Fighting Okra.)*

### **Best mornings**

Best mornings to be out and about in central Arkansas, doing matutinal things in cool, dry weather, were in middle and late August. No, really.

### **Worst damned**

Policy at Harding U. at Searcy was first that students were prohibited from buying state lottery tickets, then it was changed in October so that they could buy lottery tickets without risking hell fire, then it was changed back, with some riders, codas, whereases, appurtenances and such. Additional dithering attended the question of students accepting lottery scholarship money. At last report, the policy message to students seemed to be: You're damned if you do, damned if you don't.

### **Best clouds**

Pearly back-lit cumuli, real dazzlers, hanging over the city Nov. 11.

### **Worst power grab**

A man in Branch (Franklin County) suffered multiple serious injuries in May when he was knocked to the ground from atop a metal ladder while trying to attach jumper cables to a transformer in what police said was an attempt to steal electricity. Authorities who came to investigate found a meth lab in the man's house.

### **Worst gallivanting**

U.S. Rep. Mike Ross of Prescott, self-proclaimed fiscal conservative, was outed in August by the Wall Street Journal for a high-dollar taxpayer-financed expedition, with his wife, to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Antarctica on a luxuriously outfitted Air Force jet in January. Trip was supposed to educate lawmakers on climate change. In Ross' case, almost needless to say, it didn't work.

### **Worst waffling**

Sen. Blanche Lincoln on health care reform.

### **Best watermelons**

A 48-pounder, one of a truckload grown somewhere in South Arkansas, bought at Mad Butcher, Sheridan, on Aug. 17 for \$6. Chill for two days before cutting, and afterward you'll be congratulating God.

### **Worst tomatoes**

Weather was said to be the main culprit in the crummiest tomato season in memory, with the skimpiest harvest in 50 years of big ol' good uns and good ol' big uns. A new kind of blight was also a factor.

### **Best standing firm, standing tall**

"I will never vote for a bill to kill old people, period." – U.S. Rep. Mike Ross of Prescott, in August.

### **Worst priorities**

The Arkansas legislature decided in March that the state's most pressing need in the area of constitutional reform was an amendment affirming the "right" of Arkansans to hunt and fish.

### **Worst subscribers**

A Harvard study released in February showed that Arkansas ranks No. 7 among the states in Internet porn subscriptions.

### **Worst wallet management**

A Cabot man was charged in January with breaking into several cars and stealing stereos, computers, GPS systems and other items. He became a suspect after police found his wallet, with an ID in it, in one of the ransacked cars.

A North Little Rock man was arrested in October after having dropped his wallet at the scene of a Little Rock home intrusion. The wallet contained not only an ID but an unpaid parking ticket that gave police a good description of the man's car. Before the police arrived to arrest him, the man phoned the house he'd broken into demanding that his wallet be returned, along with some extra money to compensate him for the trouble he'd been put to.

### **Worst mortified**

A janitor at a Walnut Ridge funeral home was charged in January with making meth in a basement room at the funeral home, right next to an embalming room and just across the street from the sheriff's office. A funeral home spokesman said, "We were mortified."

### **Worst shakes**

A UALR earthquake expert disclosed in January the existence of a previously unknown major fault line – unrelated to the New Madrid fault – running through East Arkansas. He said it had the potential to cause catastrophic quakes of magnitude 7.0 or stronger in Central Arkansas. These could kill thousands. Something else to make you lie awake nights.

### **Worst ice**

A late January ice storm that covered the northern half of Arkansas left nearly a quarter million homes without power, many for more than a week, and resulted in more than a dozen deaths in traffic accidents on slippery roads.

### **Worst pump news**

A gallon of unleaded regular was \$1.38 at the first of the year. That's no typo. One dollar and thirty-eight cents. It was double that by Memorial Day, and then pretty much leveled off the rest of the year.

### **Best quotes**

"There is a movement afoot to allow concealed weapons to be carried in places where they used to be prohibited – churches, schools, bars. I don't understand how any minister who is familiar with the teachings of the Bible can do this. Jesus didn't say, 'Go ahead, make my day.' " – Rev. Don Phillips, pastor, Central Church of Christ in Little Rock and

survivor of a church shooting some years ago, quoted in the New York Times in June.

“Jesus didn't come to take sides; he came to take over.” – Attributed to Sen. Mark Pryor in the book “The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power,” by Jeff Sharlet, published in May.

### **Worst wet**

It was the third rainiest May ever in Central Arkansas. About 14 inches on the average across the region. Then after a rather normal June, central Arkansas experienced its rainiest July since record-keeping started back in the Era of Good Feelings. The second half of September, usually our driest month, was a soggy mess. So was nearly all of normally bone-dry October, culminating with a veritable gout of rain on Oct. 29, measuring around six inches in most central Arkansas locations. By Halloween, we'd seen our wettest October ever. Rainfall was two feet above the annual average. At the end of the harvest, crop damage from rainfall in Arkansas in 2009 was said to have nosed over \$350 million.

Then another stupendous rainstorm in December – a single downpour at our place lasted 14 hours without a break – added half a foot to the rain totals, making 2009 the wettest year in history in much of Central Arkansas.

### **Worst hot**

Much of central Arkansas had already been visited by 100-degree heat the week before summer started. But after summer arrived and officially set up shop, every time a hot spell threatened, here came more of that rain.

### **Worst black hole**

After one of the deluges of early May, Homer and Maxine Boose woke to find a giant sinkhole where their front yard had been on South Chester Street in Little Rock. It was so big you could drop a stone in it and never hear it hit bottom, going all the way through to China apparently.

### **Worst washouts**

One of the all-day rains of May washed out the last day of Riverfest, the spring festival in Little Rock, which otherwise would've set an attendance record.

A week-long spell of rain in early October effectively washed out the first half of the state fair.

### **Worst muzzling**

Arkansas Tech University at Russellville announced in March that it would tolerate free speech two hours a week in an indoor auditorium, and occasionally in a campus courtyard, but not otherwise. As with smoking, if you wanted to exercise First Amendment rights, you had to go off-campus.

### **Worst dirty**

In January, a hotel-rating website (TripAdvisor) named the Velda Rose Resort Hotel in Hot Springs as the 8th dirtiest hotel in the United States, based on candid reports from

paying guests.

### **Worst fungus if you're a bat**

Hundreds of caves in the state's national forests were closed indefinitely in the spring to stop the spread of a fungus that was wiping out bat populations nationwide.

### **Worst banquet news if you're a raccoon**

A school closing announced in January threatened the continuation of the annual Gillett Coon Supper, where politicians and their suckups have long gathered to gossip and eat fried raccoon, but a way was found in June to keep the thing going.

### **Worst dumbbell**

A news report in November said a man brandishing a dumbbell tried and failed to rob a restaurant in West Little Rock. A Buddhist take on the matter would ask which was the dumbbell and which was the man.

### **Worst names if you're a copy editor**

Ernie Passailaigue, new state lottery director.

Don Bacigalupi, new director of Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville.

### **Best horse**

Rachel Alexandra, 3, filly. A beast. Girl horses ruled racing in 2009. It's now the Sport of Queens.

### **Best rider**

Calvin Borel, again. Oaklawn vet won the Kentucky Oaks and Kentucky Derby on successive days in May, then the Preakness in Maryland two weeks later. Trying to become the first jockey to win racing's Triple Crown on two different horses, he finished third in the Belmont in New York in June.

### **Worst prayer**

Wiley Drake, fool California evangelist who was born in Magnolia and served as a recent Southern Baptist Convention veep, announced in June that he had been inspired by the murder of a Kansas abortion doctor to begin making imprecatory prayers asking God to strike President Obama dead.

### **Worst promotion**

Lt. Gov. Bill Halter in June spent \$9,000 of taxpayer money to publish a six-page brochure touting his accomplishments, featuring 12 pictures of him doing whatever it is that a lieutenant governor does.

### **Worst voters**

*Arkansas Times* readers – that would be you morons – chose Sheffield Nelson as

Arkansas's best citizen in this year's Best of Arkansas voting in July. Worst bogarter of all the good concert seats would be more like it. You also chose Philip Martin of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, self-described Bigshot Movie Man, or some such bullshit, as best Arkansas newspaper writer. You were joking, right? You snarky rascals.

### **Worst distraction**

At the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in July, classes had to be canceled, services were disrupted at the Poison Center, and other scheduled activities had to be reshuffled – all because UAMS personnel were following the Michael Jackson funeral rites on their various electronic devices. An urgent afternoon memo asked everyone to please return to work and try to focus.

### **Worst ghostwriting**

On the same day in July that the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette published the obituary of business columnist Leroy Donald, it announced that his column would resume the following week.

### **Best woo pig**

Willburette, a 600-pound sow, on her way from Nebraska to an Arkansas packing plant, escaped unhurt from the carnage of a big Interstate wreck one night in June, and found her way to a backyard pool at a private residence in North Little Rock. Soon after, in early July, the Pulaski County Humane Society, through a kind of Swine Witness Protection program, provided her with a new identity (“Hermione,” rumor had it) and secretly relocated her to a welcoming sty somewhere in the county.

### **Worst woo pig**

After what was described as a prickly meeting in July with critics of the high salaries for officials of the new state lottery, Ernie Passailaigue, the lottery director, a South Carolinian, attempted a diversion with what has come to be seen as the last refuge of an Arkansas scoundrel. He launched into a rowdy sooeey call.

### **Best tribute**

Famed jazz guitarist Bill Frisell cut an album in July to honor Mike Disfarmer, the Depression-era photographer whose riveting studio portraits of residents of Heber Springs and Cleburne County have become a sensation among Up East high-dollar art collectors.

### **Best requiescat**

Socks, the Clintons' family cat from the Arkansas years through the White House years, died in Maryland at age 19 or 20 in February. Some of his ashes were scattered at the Arkansas Governor's Mansion in Little Rock in a service that featured an elegiac poem by Arkansas First Lady Ginger Beebe.

### **Best moonwalk**

One day in October, Randy Rainwater, Little Rock's favorite radio sportstalk cliché-mangler, was talking about Razorback fans and how they'd probably expected too much too soon from quarterback Ryan Mallett. They thought Ryan could walk on water; they

thought he'd hung the moon. Randy probably meant one of those, but how it came out was: They thought he could walk on the moon.

### **Best waterspout**

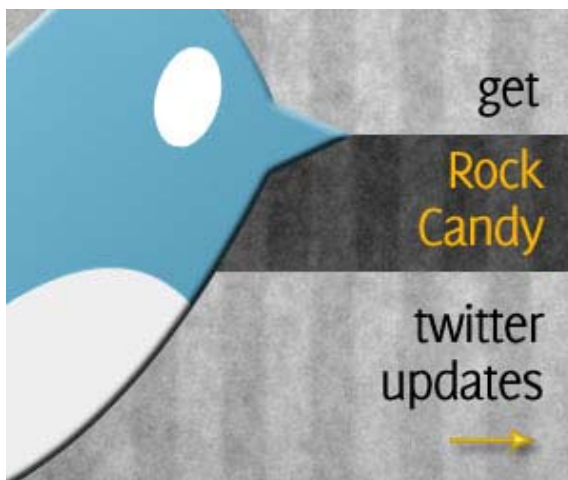
A dandy over Lake Conway was captured on video by an amateur photographer on July 21.

### **Best fireman**

Ryan Franklin, ace closer for the St. Louis Cardinals and a big factor in their successful season, is from Fort Smith. With a flowing beard about the length, consistency and color of a whisk broom, he looked like he'd just stepped off a 19th century cough drop box.

### **Worst bro tase**

Remember "Don't Tase Me, Bro!" – voted the most memorable quote of 2007? Well, in October, Conway police were called to a private club to quell a disturbance that involved an off-duty Vilonia policeman. The melee concluded with the Vilonia officer being tased by a Conway officer, his brother.



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