

# Monroe festival lights up the sky with blues and balloons



A hot air balloon floats above the Green County countryside near Monroe. The town's Balloon & Blues Festival returns to the Green County Fairgrounds June 17-18. Credit: Green County Tourism



Johnny Wartenweiler (left) and Perry Weber are members of the Jimmys, a blues band that will play the Balloon & Blues Festival. - Green County Tourism

*By Brian E. Clark, Special to the Journal Sentinel*

Monroe residents Gary Gulaski and his wife Maggie have been to rhythm and blues shows all over the Midwest, but they say the medium-sized gathering in their backyard is one of their favorites.

So naturally the pair is pleased that after a one-year hiatus the Green County Fairgrounds will rock again in June with some of the best blues bands in the region.

The music, added several years ago to an ongoing balloon rally, now in its 30th year, will be held June 17 and 18 (Father's Day weekend) and feature six groups and more than a dozen colorful hot-air balloons.

"The evening glows — which will be happening within sight of the main stage — are really stunning," said Gulaski, a recent retiree. "In my opinion, balloons and blues fit perfectly together. They are both really cool."

Gulaski said when he told some of his friends who are members of the Great Northern Blues Society about the festival's acts, they were mightily impressed that the two days of music would include free concerts from Chicago's Nick Moss Band, Brent Johnson and the Call Up out of New Orleans, and the Left Wing Bourbon Band from the Chippewa Valley.

Local favorites, the Jimmys, led by Jimmy Voegeli, plus the Birddog Blues Band and the Léman Quartet (both from Madison) will also entertain festival goers, he said.

"I'm just a Polish boy from central Wisconsin, but there is something about the blues that really touches my soul," said Gulaski, 65.

"When I was growing up, everyone was crazy about the Beatles, but I liked the Rolling Stones...same for the Allman Brothers and Bonnie Raitt. I just love that sound. I fell away from it in the 1990s and then came back."

Gulaski said he's also looking forward to hearing Michael Ledbetter, who sings with the Nick Moss Band and is a descendant of the great Texas bluesman Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter.

"Moss is a guitar master known for his amazing fretwork, Ken Olufs with Birddog plays a mean harmonica and the Jimmys were recently voted the 'Best Horn Band' at the Wisconsin Area Music Industry Awards," he said. "Believe it or not, Voegeli is a local dairyman when he's not playing the blues. He and his family run a fourth-generation brown Swiss dairy farm near New Glarus."

Gulaski said the audiences for the concerts usually number less than 700, so blues fans should be able to get close to the acts.

"Frankly, for the quality of musicians who have played at this festival, it has been underattended," he said.

Matt Urban, who has been involved with hot air balloons for 30-plus years, said he's pleased that the event has returned after a yearlong "pause."

"People had to figure out if they wanted this to go forward, and fortunately they did," he said. The festival is now being run by ARC-Green County, an organization that provides aid to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Urban said the balloons that are participating will come from around the Badger State as well as Illinois and Iowa. The first launch will take place at 6:30 p.m. Friday, followed by flights on Saturday at 6:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. Both evenings will also have balloon glows at sunset, around 8:30 p.m.

He said flight patterns depend on prevailing gentle winds over the Green County countryside. When propane runs low, pilots look for an open place to land.

"For the glows, the balloons are staked in the field, so they don't go anywhere," he said. "When the burners are fired up at night, they light the balloons against the sky. With the colorful ones, it can look like a kaleidoscope."

Urban said he once crewed for a company called "Balloon the Rockies," which was based near Breckenridge and Keystone, Colo. With a base of 9,600 feet, he said the area is a "wild" place to fly.

"Sometimes we'd have to extract the balloons with snowmobiles," he said. "A few times they'd fly all the way up to the Continental Divide at 14,000-plus feet and we'd have to retrieve them with a helicopter. It's a bit of a mellower experience here in the Midwest."

Urban, who returned to the Midwest 30 years ago, said he likes the Monroe Balloon & Blues Festival for its "community vibe."

"There have been a number of balloon events in Wisconsin that have come and gone, but we're the longest-running one. It's all weather-dependent, of course, but I'm glad we've been able to keep this going," he said.

In addition to music and hot air balloons, the festival will also include a car show, family and kids' activities, local brews and food. New this year is the Green County Gran Fondue, a cycling event aimed at raising funds for the Monroe Clinic & Hospital Foundation Cancer Fund.

**More information:** Admission to the Green County Fairgrounds for the festival is free; parking is \$3. For more, see [monroeballoonrally.com](http://monroeballoonrally.com) or call (888) 222-9111.

**Getting there:** Monroe is about 110 miles southwest of Milwaukee via I-43 and Highways 81 and 11.

*Brian E. Clark is a Madison writer*

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