2026 GOLDEN TICKET AWARDS HONOR AMUSEMENT PARKS AROUND THE WORLD

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The news publication Amusement Today held the annual Golden Ticket Awards earlier this month.

The Golden Ticket Awards have been honoring theme parks around the world since 1998. A Golden Ticket award is the premier honor in the amusement park industry; parks vie for these awards each year to display them in their parks. Connecticut's own Boulder Dash has taken home the Best Wooden Coaster award a whopping five times, most recently in 2016. Let's dive into who took home some hardware this year.

The awards were held in Austin, Texas at Cotaland, which officially opened its doors on Saturday, Sept. 26. Before announcing award winners, the Golden Ticket Awards honored two titans of the industry who recently died. Dick Knoebel of Knoebels Amusement Resort died in July, and then just over a month later, Dolly Parton died too. She was not only a fabulous musician and philanthropist, but also dreamer-in-chief of Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

Knoebel and Parton were both pivotal figures in expanding the brands and likeness of their respective parks, bringing them national attention. They were each recognized as a "Legend" by the Golden Ticket Awards.

Speaking of Dollywood, the park took home the Most Beautiful Park award, along with Best Guest Experience, Best Kids Area and Best Family Coaster with Big Bear Mountain. The coaster's manufacturer, Vekoma, took home Supplier of the Year, really solidifying the comeback Vekoma has made over the years.

Best New Attraction of 2026 went to Falcon's Flight at Six Flags Qiddya City, located right outside Riyadh, Saudia Arabia.

Falcon's Flight is the world's most ambitious rollercoaster; it holds the record of being the longest, fastest and tallest rollercoaster in the world. It opened as the first ever Exa coaster — an Exa coaster being over 600 feet tall. Falcon's Flight total elevation change on the cliff is 640 feet. The coaster also took home the award for Best New Rollercoaster.

Best New Family Attraction went to Phantom Theater: Opening Nightmare at Kings Island. Then Best Dark Ride was claimed by Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment at Epic Universe, once again beating Rise of the Resistance at Disney's Hollywood Studios.

Europa Park in Germany took home Best Park for the 11th time. Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, Indiana, took home Best Water Park, dethroning Universal's Volcano Bay.

The two big awards left were Best Wooden Coaster and Best Steel Coaster. For the first time in 15 years, the title of best wooden coaster in the world is heading back to Santa Claus. The Voyage at Holiday World was awarded for best wooden coaster in the world. The second longest wooden rollercoaster in the world with a night ride like no other dethroned eight-time consecutive winner Phoenix at Knoebels. The Gravity Group coaster is nothing like anything else in the world and is a must ride.



The FireChaser Express in full motion at Dollywood. Dollywood won the Most Beautiful Park award, Best Guest Experience, Best Kids Area and Best Family Coaster with Big Bear Mountain at the 2026 Golden Ticket Awards.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF @DOLLYWOOD ON INSTAGRAMX

For the steel category, I hope it doesn't sting to hear that Fury 325 at Carowinds took home the award for the 10th time in a row. The world's tallest rollercoaster with a lift hill has won the award 10 times in its 11-year existence, with the exception of 2020 when the awards were cancelled.

The Bolliger & Mabillard Giga coaster won the award despite facing some challenges this year with an issue regarding the coaster's foundation that shut it down for two weeks. It was a scary month for anyone who planned a Carowinds trip in late July — I mean, who would do that?

Fury 325 concludes my coverage of the 2026 Golden Ticket Awards. I'm looking forward to a great fall season of amusement parks, Fright Fest and the best two words in the enthusiast community: night rides. Let's get excited for what the amusement park industry will bring us in 2027.

Final Four of Fat Bear Week

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Every autumn, millions of people around the world gather online to celebrate a unique viral tradition: Fat Bear Week. Hosted by Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve, this annual tradition is a single-elimination tournament that invites the public to cast votes for the brown bears of the preserve.

Fat Bear Week originally began as Fat Bear Tuesday in 2014, when former Katmai National Park ranger Mike Fitz noticed Facebook users posting side-by-side photos comparing brown bears' midsummer bodies to their fall seasonal weight gains.

To highlight their transformations, Fitz created an online contest where users voted for their favorite bear by liking the photos. This competition was won by Bear 480, better known as Otis.

Driven by overwhelming public interest and engagement, organizers expanded the single-day event into the first week-long Fat Bear Week in 2015.

While the March Madness-Esque bracket is lighthearted and fun, the bears' seasonal weight highlights a crucial biological process called hyperphagia. During hyperphagia, bears enter a period of extreme feasting. Usually, bears feast on salmon to store the life-saving energy required for harsh winters.

The bears typically enter this stage during mid-summer and will spend weeks foraging for up to 22 hours a day, according to Friends of the Bridger-Tenton.

Most bears hunt alongside Katmai's Brook River. This river hosts one of the healthiest, most abundant salmons runs left on Earth. Thousands of salmon swim upstream, and the bears congregate at the Brooks River to feast on fatty salmon, eggs and skin, consuming tens of thousands of calories per day.



A family of bears walking near a lake at Katmai Katmai National Park and Reserve in Alaska. Katmai announced the return their bracket-style competition, Fat Bear Week, on September 11, 2026.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @KATMAINPP ON INSTAGRAM.

The National Library of Medicine states that during winter hibernation, bears spend four to six months without eating, drinking or exercising. For them, gaining extra weight is not a luxury, it's a matter of life or death. To stay alive, their bodies burn stored fat for energy, causing them to lose up to one-third of their body weight by spring.

Toward the fall season, the bears gradually wind down their binge-eating and eventually stop. They continue drinking fluids and flushing out waste. Around this period, Fat Bear Week begins. This year's competition ran from Tuesday, Sept. 22 to Tuesday, Sept. 29.

Voters compared photos of the bears from when they were slim in late summer to their current massive look.

In early summer, adult male bears typically weigh 600 to 900 pounds, depending on population numbers and food availability. By autumn, they are typically 1,000 pounds. The female bears, also known as sows, weigh around one-third less than males in mid-summer. In the fall, they weigh around 400 to 700 pounds.

The four semi-finalists for Fat Bear Week 2026 were: The 132 Family, Bear 910, Bear 89 (also known as "Backpack") and Bear 164 (also known as "Bucky Dent" or "Bucky"). Although voters learn fun facts about the bears, their specific weights are not shared.

The 132 Family features a large adult female with grizzled dark brown fur, forward leaning ears and a wide belly. Her face is distinguished from other bears by the inverted "V" of dark fur on her forehead. She is a recent mother to her fourth litter of cubs, and although her weight isn't specified, she is a top contender for Fat Bear Week.

Bear 910 is a female brown bear, first identified in 2019 at the Brooks River in Katmai National Park and Preserve. She is recognized for her large, blond, floppy ears. Bear 910 recently made wildlife history in 2023 by adopting her sister's cub. Besides this, she gained an impressive amount of weight, making her another top contender for the competition.

Backpack is an adult male bear known for climbing onto his mother's back when he was a cub as they waded through the Brook. Unlike most of the many dominant, aggressive bears in the tournament, Backpack is known for a remarkably docile and non-confrontational temperament.

The last bear to mention is Bucky, a large adult male who has grizzled brown fur and blond-tipped ears. Many find it easy to identify him by the line of darker fur near his eyes and upper muzzle.

Bucky was first identified as an independent 2.5-year-old in 2019 and has risen in dominance over the years. Productive fishing spots are often limited at the Brooks River, especially for young bears. Bucky challenges other bears for preferred fishing spots and dominance, even when no fishing spot is in dispute.

Male brown bears in Katmai usually reach their peak size and strength when they are about 12-20 years old. Bucky is estimated to be only 9 years old, so there's a good chance he could grow even larger and more dominant.

Win or lose, every bear in the bracket has accomplished what matters most: packing on the life-saving fat needed to endure the harsh months ahead. As the voting closes and the bears head into hibernation, Katmai's champions leave behind an eager online audience to watch their impressive transformations begin all over again next summer.



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