

ON THE FARM

‘Agritainment’ in Antrim

Visitors get amazed
— and lost — in
Bolt farm’s maize

BY MIKE NORTON

Record-Eagle staff writer

ATWOOD — When the fall harvest season rolls around, Antrim County farmers Russ and Cindy Bolt sometimes find it easy to get lost in their work.

And for the past three years they’ve been inviting other people to get lost in it, too.

Each fall since 2001, Russ and Cindy have turned the cornfield just west of their Ellsworth Road farm into a complex maze — a labyrinth into which hundreds of local schoolchildren, Scouts, church group members and families disappear, sometimes for as long as an hour, before eventually finding their way back out.

The Bolts raise about 150 acres of corn, pumpkins, melons, winter squash and flowers, in addition to their beef cattle operation between Atwood and Ellsworth.

Although they ship quite a few of their fall vegetables to area grocery stores and supermarkets, they also run a thriving roadside market at the farm, and they figured the corn maze would be a nice way to attract even more visitors.

“It’s getting quite a following,” said Russ.

“We’ve had a lot of fun with it,” said Cindy. “It’s amazing how fast a group of kindergartners can go though it, but if you get a group of high-school students in there, they won’t be out for at least an hour.”

“It helps us sell our pumpkins, too.”

Each year’s maze is different. This year, the design (titled “Bolt’s Dino Maze”) features a huge stegosaurus surrounded by zigzags, dead ends and blind turns carved into the surrounding rows of 10-foot cornstalks. Although the



Record-Eagle/Meegan Reid

Signs point to the maze at the Bolt Farm in Antrim County.

Bolts supply their guests with maps to the maze, finding your way around in it can be a disorienting experience even in broad daylight. After dark it can be downright terrifying.

“That’s when it’s really spooky, when you’re wandering around all these blind alleys with flashlights, and the wind starts rustling the corn, and it sounds like there’s something out there,” said

Cindy. “Our 9-year-old just loves it. Her favorite thing is to go through it at night with her dad and scare people.”

Designing and creating such a huge and intricate work is an immense undertaking, and the Bolts don’t do it themselves. Instead, they’ve come to rely on a professional company: The MAiZE, founded in 1996 by Utah farmer Brett Herbst, which now provides

“agritainment” to more than 140 communities in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Europe.

“They’re the ones who started this whole thing, and they’ve got all kinds of different designs,” said Russ. “They come up from Utah, usually in July when the corn is about knee-high, with a very exact grid that they follow, and they cut it out in a day. We just have to go in and keep it weeded afterward.”

The Bolts charge \$5 for adults to go through the maze, and \$3.50 for children 6 through 12. Since they enjoy watching large groups of people get lost, they charge a \$3-per-head group rate, regardless of age. This year they’re also hoping to do a Halloween-themed “fright night” to benefit one of the local food pantries.

The maze opened in September and usually stays open for customers seven days a week until the middle of November — although the Bolts discourage people from venturing in on rainy, muddy days. Since it’s planted with

field corn, the whole creation is cut down and chopped up for cattle feed when it’s no longer in use, although some of the Bolts’ livestock have been getting an early taste of it already.

“We usually let the children feed some corn to the cows when they’re done,” said Cindy. “And those cattle get so they start moving toward the maze as soon as they can hear the kids laughing.”

To reach the Bolts, call 588-6384.

Farm markets around the region

Oct. 10 & 12: Elk Rapids Farmers Market; 8 a.m., Chamber of Commerce, U.S. 31, Elk Rapids. 264-8202, (800) 626-7328

Oct. 11: Traverse City Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, between Cass and Union and Boardman River and Grandview Parkway, Traverse City, 922-2050

Oct. 11: Leelanau Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, Broadway and Lincoln, Suttons Bay, 256-9888

Oct. 16: East Jordan Farmers Market; 9 a.m.-noon; Sportsmen’s Park, East Jordan

Oct. 17 & 19: Elk Rapids Farmers Market; 8 a.m., Chamber of Commerce, U.S. 31, Elk Rapids. 264-8202, (800) 626-7328

Oct. 18: Leelanau Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, Broadway and Lincoln, Suttons Bay, 256-9888

Oct. 18: Traverse City Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, between Cass and Union and Boardman River and Grandview Parkway, Traverse City, 922-2050

Oct. 23: East Jordan Farmers Market; 9 a.m.-noon; Sportsmen’s Park, East Jordan

Oct. 24 & 26: Elk Rapids Farmers Market; 8 a.m., Chamber of Commerce, U.S. 31, Elk Rapids. 264-8202, (800) 626-7328

Oct. 25: Leelanau Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, Broadway and Lincoln, Suttons Bay, 256-9888

Oct. 25: Traverse City Farmers Market, 8 a.m.-noon, between Cass and Union and Boardman River and Grandview Parkway, downtown Traverse City, 922-2050

Oct. 30: East Jordan Farmers Market; 9 a.m.-noon; Sportsmen’s Park, East Jordan

Oct. 31: Elk Rapids Farmers Market; 8 a.m., Chamber of Commerce, U.S. 31, Elk Rapids. 264-8202, (800) 626-7328



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The Bolts hire a company to come in and carve out the maze in their corn field.