

Well-Grounded

The Story of Groundhog Day

Why celebrate a rodent?



There are religious holidays of all types, national holidays that honor heroes and events, and even silly holidays like National Candy Corn Day that we celebrate “just for fun.” But a day devoted to a chubby rodent that spends a lot of time underground? Now *that’s* a holiday worth discussing.

Like many unusual holidays, this one goes back centuries. Early European Christians celebrated the Feast of the Presentation, honoring the day when Mary and Joseph first brought the infant Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, 40 days after his birth on

Christmas Day. Later, this became the day when priests blessed the candles—candle mass—used in this celebration. Candlemas Day, February 2, merged with other pre-Christian celebrations, marking the first possible day when hibernating animals might awaken and the end of winter was in sight.

Candlemas Day and the Hedgehog

Ancient wisdom from the United Kingdom maintains that if there is nice weather on Candlemas Day, harsh winter weather will follow:

If Candlemas Day is clear and bright,
Winter will have another bite.
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,
Winter is gone and will not come again.

The Romans brought the Candlemas Day weather superstition north to the Germanic peoples they encountered during their conquest of northern Europe. The Germans incorporated it into their own folklore. They concluded that if the hedgehog, a common hibernating animal in their area, awoke to sunshine on Candlemas Day, he would cast a shadow and thus predict continued winter weather.

The Beginning of Groundhog Day in the United States

It’s likely that German immigrants brought the story of the hedgehog with them when they came to the United States. And while they brought the tradition, they could not bring the hedgehog. Another native hibernating animal—the groundhog, or woodchuck, as it is also called—was substituted. The groundhog/woodchuck was a good choice because it was considered a “wise and sensible animal” by many Native Americans and figures prominently in their creation stories.

The earliest American reference to anything like Groundhog Day is an entry in a diary dated 1841, part of the collection at the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania:

Last Tuesday, the 2nd, was Candlemas day, the day on which, according to the Germans, the Groundhog peeps out of his winter quarters and if he sees his shadow he pops back for another six weeks nap, but if the day be cloudy he remains out, as the weather is to be moderate.

~ 4 February 1841, from Morgantown, Berks County (Pennsylvania) storekeeper James Morris' diary

Thus, Groundhog Day was born in the New World. According to tradition, on February 2 of each year, the groundhog leaves its burrow (where it has been hibernating through the winter) to see if the cold weather is still in full force. If the groundhog cannot see its shadow, it is said to remain aboveground, effectively ending its hibernation. However, if it sees its shadow (if the sun is shining), the groundhog returns to its burrow, and we can expect six more weeks of cold weather... or so the story goes.

A Second February 2nd Tradition

Another February 2 notion, originating with 19th-century American farmers, is "Groundhog Day – Half Your Hay." New England farmers knew that February 2 was nowhere close to the end of winter, regardless of the groundhog's forecast. Indeed, February 2 is the heart of winter in many climates. Thus, if the farmer didn't have half of his hay remaining on Groundhog Day, he could expect lean times for the cows before spring (and, therefore, fresh grass) arrived.

Punxsutawney Phil

The most famous weather-forecasting groundhog in the U.S. is Punxsutawney Phil. He resides in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where they hold an official ceremony every February 2. Here are some fun facts about Phil:

- Punxsutawney Phil's complete nickname is "The Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators, and Weather Prophet Extraordinaire."
- Promoting Punxsutawney Phil was the idea of the owner of the *Punxsutawney Spirit*, Punxsutawney's local newspaper. He believed that promoting the groundhog legend would bring more business and tourists to the town. He was correct!
- Because of its association with Groundhog Day, Punxsutawney is also known as "The Weather Capital of the World."
- Punxsutawney is in western Pennsylvania, about 80 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.
- Punxsutawney Phil has visited the White House and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
- The town where the movie *Groundhog Day* was filmed isn't really Punxsutawney; it was filmed in Woodstock, Illinois.
- During Prohibition, Phil threatened to inflict 60 weeks of winter on the Punxsutawney community if he wasn't allowed one drink.
- In 1958, Phil announced the first man-made satellite to orbit Earth was actually the "United States Chucknik" rather than the Soviet Sputnik (or "Muttnik").
- On February 2, 1981, Phil wore a yellow ribbon in honor of the American hostages in Iran.

- In 1993, Columbia Pictures released the movie *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray. In the years following the release of the movie, crowds numbering as high as 30,000 have visited Phil's home in Punxsutawney.

More Groundhog Day Facts of Interest

- The word *woodchuck* originates from the Native American word *ojjik* (pronounced "wejak"). Some Native Americans believed their ancestors began the life cycle as animals. The woodchuck was acknowledged as the "grandfather" of the earliest inhabitants of the area.
- Early American settlers ate groundhog.
- Did you know Phil is not the only famous groundhog? There is also Florida Phyllis, Buckeye Chuck, and Jimmy the Groundhog.
- In Canada, the name of the groundhog used to predict the length of winter is Wiarton Willie. Wiarton Willie is a rare albino groundhog with white hair and pink eyes.

Discussion Starters

- Share [Phil's Past Predictions](#). (He has only a 39% accuracy rate.) Do you recall what happened last year?
- What is your prediction for this winter? Will Phil see his shadow or not? Regardless of whether he does or doesn't, do you think spring is around the corner, or is there going to be six more weeks of winter?
- People are superstitious about the weather. Here are some weather-related superstitions for the group to review and discuss:
 - If the rooster crows at night, he's trying to say rain's in sight.
 - The hooting of an owl says the weather will be foul.
 - When you see a beaver carrying sticks in its mouth, it will be a hard winter. You'd better go south.
 - Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in morning, sailor's warning!
 - When the chairs squeak, it's about rain they speak.
 - Expect the weather to be fair when crows fly in pairs.
 - When ladybugs swarm, expect a day that's warm.
 - When chickens scratch together, there's sure to be foul weather.
 - Flies bite more before a storm.
 - Frogs croak more and ducks quack louder before rain.

Can You Guess?

Here's a quick quiz about Punxsutawney Phil and Groundhog Day.

1. How old is the current Punxsutawney Phil? His owners claim there has been only one

Answer: Punxsutawney Phil. The usual groundhog life span is six to eight years. But Phil is given a sip of a magical elixir every summer during the Annual Groundhog Picnic, and that drink gives him another seven years of life.

2. Where is Phil's winter hibernation burrow?

Answer: On Gobbler's Knob, the highest hill in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

3. When was the first trip to Gobbler's Knob?

Answer: February 2, 1887.

4. Where does Phil live when he's not hibernating?

Answer: In a climate-controlled habitat adjoining the Punxsutawney Library.

5. Why is he called Phil? He is named after King

Answer: Phillip.

6. Where are Phil's predictions recorded?

Answer: In the Congressional Record.

7. How often has Phil seen his shadow?

Answer: About 85 percent of the time.

8. How many people usually turn out to see Phil on Groundhog Day?

Answer: More than 30,000.

9. How accurate are Phil's predictions?

Answer: According to his owners, he's always right. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, however, disagrees.

10. Does Phil really make his own predictions?

Answer: Yes, when he comes out of his burrow on February 2, he speaks to the Groundhog Club President in Groundhogese, and the president translates his prediction for the world.