

Groundhog Day: History and Facts

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The official Massachusetts groundhog, Ms. G, came out of hibernation at Audubon's Drumlin Farm before a crowd of mostly children, as she saw her shadow. Photo by: John Tlumacki for The Boston Globe via Getty Images

Humans stir groundhogs from their burrows and hope they will predict an early spring. Where did this wacky tradition come from?

Today, people in colder regions of North America observe February 2 as Groundhog Day. Communities hold ceremonies, rousing a groundhog from its burrow and judging whether it sees its shadow or not. If the animal does see its silhouette, so the story goes, it means six more weeks of winter. If the day is cloudy and the groundhog doesn't spot its shadow, spring is supposed to come early. But how did this odd tradition come about?

The origins of Groundhog Day reach back decades and across the Atlantic Ocean. February 2 marks the midpoint of winter in Europe. It has been a significant day in ancient and modern cultures. For instance, the Celts of Europe celebrated it as Imbolc. For them, this pre-Christian festival marked the beginning of spring. As Christianity spread across Europe, Imbolc evolved into Candelmas, a feast honoring Jesus. In parts of Europe, Christians believed a sunny Candelmas meant another 40 days of cold and snow.

Germans brought idea to America

Germans added their own twist on the religious tradition. They ruled the day sunny only if badgers and other animals saw their shadows. When German immigrants settled in Pennsylvania in the 18th and 19th centuries, they brought the custom with them. They gave the job to an animal native to North America -- the groundhog.

Also known as woodchucks, groundhogs belong to the marmot family, a group of large ground squirrels. They grow up to 25 inches in length and can live for 10 years in captivity. These big, bristly rodents feed on tender plants, wild berries, and insects to put on weight for their winter hibernation. They are also well-known for raiding vegetable gardens and farm fields. Groundhogs spend the winter sleeping in their burrows. Their heart rates and body temperature fall to save energy. By February, they can lose as much as half their body weight.

The first official Groundhog Day celebration in the United States took place February 2, 1887, in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. It was the brainchild of local newspaper editor Clymer Freas. He convinced a group of businessmen and groundhog hunters — known as the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club — to support his idea. The men trekked to a site called Gobbler's Knob. There, the original groundhog delivered bad news. He saw his shadow, predicting six more weeks of wintery weather.

Nowadays, the yearly festivities there feature Punxsutawney Phil. He is the celebrity groundhog in this township of some 6,000 people. He is said to be more than 125 years old, reportedly due to a magical punch he drinks every summer.

Bring out the top hats

For Punxsutawney Phil, February 2 is his big day. Thousands of people attend the ceremony, and it receives wide-ranging news coverage. The ceremony is led by a group of local officials known as the Inner Circle. Its members wear top hats and speak in Pennsylvania Dutch, a dialect brought by German immigrants. They supposedly communicate with the groundhog in "Groundhogese." They stir Phil from his burrow and judge whether he sees his shadow. The town and event were celebrated in the 1993 comedy "Groundhog Day," though the film was actually shot in Woodstock, Illinois.

As entertaining as Groundhog Day may be, no one should mistake groundhogs for meteorologists. Recent scientific studies indicate the animals are not accurate predictors of winter's length. Last year, Punxsutawney Phil cheered winter-weary spectators when he failed to see his shadow. However, spring-like weather arrived no earlier than usual.

Groundhogs are not the only animal forecasters of winter weather. In Vermillion, Ohio, residents rely on the woolly bear caterpillar. According to tradition, if these insects have more orange than black coloring, the upcoming winter will be mild. More than 100,000 people attend the town's Woollybear Festival held every fall.

Quiz

- 1 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) German immigrants settled in Pennsylvania in the 18th and 19th centuries.
(B) Celts used to celebrate Imbolc to mark the beginning of spring.
(C) Last year, Punxsutawney Phil predicted an early spring.
(D) The forecasts made by groundhogs are not scientifically reliable.
- 2 Which sentence BEST summarizes a main idea of the introduction [paragraphs 1-3]?
- (A) People celebrate Groundhog Day because they do not like long winters.
(B) The roots of Groundhog Day date back to the ancient celebration of the coming of spring.
(C) A great feast was held to honor Jesus at the celebration of Candlemas in ancient Europe.
(D) No one really knows exactly how Groundhog Day came about, but some say it is connected to European traditions.
- 3 Read paragraph 1. Which of the following sentences uses the word "stir" in the MOST similar way to how it is used in the first sentence?
- (A) A breeze stirred the leaves.
(B) She stirred her hot chocolate.
(C) The children began to stir as their boredom grew.
(D) You have to stir the ingredients very quickly with a big spoon.
- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Germans brought idea to America."
- They are also well-known for raiding vegetable gardens and farm fields.*
- Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "raiding" in the sentence above, would MOST CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?
- (A) attacking
(B) eating
(C) tending
(D) invading