

Can Spring Be Far Behind a Groundhog's Behind?



By Alan Caruba

When Punxsutawney Phil sees his shadow on February 2nd, you can be sure that spring will arrive on March 20 this year. Truth is, even if he doesn't see it, it will still occur on March 20. On some years, it occurs on March 21.

Groundhog Day is a holiday celebrated in both the U.S. and Canada, thus ensuring the eternal bonds between our two, great nations. It well may be celebrated elsewhere, depending on whether a groundhog population exists along with the vicissitudes of winter. It is an import that began as a Pennsylvania German custom in the 18th century.

A nation in which generations have grown old without once stepping foot on a farm or gone hunting in the woods can be forgiven for wondering what the heck Groundhog Day is all about, let alone what a groundhog is.

It has to do with Candlemas, a holiday to celebrate the ritual purification of Mary, forty days after the birth of Jesus. It is one of the four "cross-quarters" of the year, occurring halfway between the first day of winter and the first day of spring.

The tradition was that, if Candlemas was sunny, the remaining six weeks of winter would be stormy. Thus, if the groundhog emerges from hibernation on February 2nd and looks behind himself to see his shadow, it must be sunny.

I have some serious doubts whether a member of the family Sciuridae, that of ground squirrels, can in fact actually look behind himself. My bet is that *Marmota monax* has to turn his fat little self around entirely for that.

In earlier times, the job of looking behind himself belonged to the badger, but was reassigned to groundhogs which, by the way, are also known as woodchucks.

At this point you're saying, Alan, you are telling me far more about groundhogs than I ever even wanted to know. Hey, don't blame me. Blame those Pennsylvania Germans of yesteryear who were, by the way, also called Pennsylvania Dutch.

Someone in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania clearly had an idea to put the little village on the map. A thriving trade in groundhog paraphernalia can be purchased there as well as via the Internet because [Groundhog Day](#) has its own website. Of course!

In a nation that is totally snowed and iced-in on Groundhog Day, any indication that winter will come to an end is a welcome one, so we shall all breathlessly wait to see if Phil sees his shadow.

Or not.

The cliché is that March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. My bet is that winter will linger beyond March 20th this year. Meteorologically speaking, we are all in for longer, harsher winters while Old Man Sun sleeps through the Maunder Minimum, a solar cycle in which there is far less solar radiation.

All the groundhogs in America and Canada will be sleeping in for a while.

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