

# The Origin of Groundhog Day



Groundhog Day, celebrated every year on **February 2**, is an unusual holiday that stretches back hundreds of years to European traditions and ancient times.

Why this date in midwinter? Groundhog Day stems from an ancient Celtic celebration called Imbolc, which is a cross-quarter day. This calendar is rooted in astronomy—and the movement of the Earth around the Sun. In the Northern Hemisphere, this date marks the midpoint between the winter solstice in December and the spring equinox in March.

Groundhog Day is a quirky holiday celebrated in the United States and Canada. It's a fun way to break up the winter season and look forward to spring. It's based on the belief that some animals can sense seasonal changes, and their hibernation patterns will indicate the coming weather. In this case, if the marmot emerges from his burrow and sees his shadow, he hurries back to his hole, and there will be 6 more weeks of winter. If he doesn't see his shadow, spring will come early.

The tradition originated in Germany and was brought to the United States by early settlers. Probably the most famous groundhog, Phil, is from western Pennsylvania. (Yes, there are other groundhog celebrities, such as the one in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.) This Pennsylvania groundhog is amusingly known as "Punxsutawney Phil, Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators, and Weather-Prophet Extraordinary." Phil was named by the "Punxsutawney Groundhog Club" in 1887, the same year they declared Punxsutawney the weather capital of the world.

Every February 2, the "faithful followers of Phil" gather early in the morning to watch Phil emerge from his burrow. His "prediction" is announced to the crowd, and it's typically met with lots of excitement.

According to NOAA, Punxsutawney Phil has accurately predicted the coming of spring **40% of the time**. That's not exactly an excellent track record. (Our guess is that "Phil" isn't naturally emerging from his burrow to the paparazzi cameras.)

Originally, Groundhog Day was a Celtic festival marking the year's first cross-quarter day, or a midpoint between seasons. Celebrated at the beginning of February, the day was called Imbolc—a term from Old Irish that is most often translated as "in the belly"—a reference to the soon-to-arrive lambs of spring. The celebration of Imbolc signaled that the Sun was halfway through its advance towards the spring equinox, and the season of new birth and light was on the horizon.

Although distinct from Imbolc, the Christian festival of light Candlemas is also observed at this time of year (February 2). The name refers to the candles lit that day in churches, which celebrate the presentation of the Christ Child in the temple of Jerusalem.

*If Candlemas be fair and bright, Come, Winter, have another flight; If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, Go Winter, and come not again.*

Groundhog Day has a rich history based on a deeper meaning; it speaks to the triumph of spring over winter—and birth over death. Again, note the appearance of light over dark with the appearance of candles and dawn—and, of course, the spiritual light of a holier presence.

So, how does the groundhog fit into this ancient festival? Historically, a groundhog wasn't the animal of choice: a bear brought the forecast to the people of France and England, while those in Germany looked to a badger for a sign.

In the 1800s, German immigrants to Pennsylvania brought their Candlemas legends with them. Finding no badgers but lots of groundhogs (also called woodchucks or whistle pigs), they adopted the New World species to fit the lore.

Today, that lore has grown into fun winter festivals, with Punxsutawney Phil and furry fellows in other states presiding.