

## It Just As Easily Could Have Been Fat Sewer Rat Day

Sometimes I imagine earth has been contacted by an intelligent alien civilization. In the early exchanges with these aliens, we may be called upon to show (prove?) that we too are intelligent. To me, chief among the list, and I wish to emphasize this is an enormously huge list, of embarrassing things to explain is Groundhog Day. Can anyone tell me why the most technologically advanced nation on this earth spends every February 2 yanking an obese rodent out of a hole in the ground to determine weather patterns for the next 6 weeks? And what exactly does it mean when they say “If it sees its shadow”? If it’s a thickly overcast day, nothing is going to see its own shadow, so why bother. If the intended meaning is to see if a thing casts a shadow, then again, why bother? Holding up a stick can do that. And what’s the alternative to six more weeks of winter? (Someone I once posed this to suggested that the alternative is “six more weeks until spring.” Huh?)

From what I’ve learned, as popular as it is in this country, Groundhog Day originated in Germany. As told, in the old country the *hedgehog* was elected to be the animal of choice for winter divination. Now there’s an idea: Let’s go out into the dead of winter and wake up a small rodent sporting needle-sharp spines on its back. Who was the lucky person chosen to pry that thing open to determine if it saw its own shadow? Coming to this country, German settlers found themselves bereft of the European hedgehog. Rather than opt for the startlingly similar American Porcupine they settled on the more docile, spineless *woodchuck*. But then why aren’t we celebrating Woodchuck Day? To arrive at the answer, you need to follow a rather twisted path. First, the woodchuck doesn’t have anything to do with wood, but rather is an English mispronunciation of the Algonquin *otchik*. The Dutch came along, saw the woodchuck (*otchik*) and called it an aardvark because – and here the logic isn’t clear and *that* never surprises me – it reminded them of an aardvark. Yes, the aardvark – the much larger, long-snouted African anteater. Now aardvark is Dutch for *earth pig* and, if you use a synonym substitution, you get *ground hog*, which, oddly enough, is a name that befits the chubby, earth-burrowing rodent better than either aardvark or woodchuck. Could this be anti-irony? Keep up with me, because we haven’t even gotten to this ‘six more weeks of winter’ thing yet.

Let’s look at the math. My life has been spent in the New York / New Jersey coastal areas. If you’ve ever checked a weather zone map, you will notice that this area has a weather zone that goes across cities such as Atlanta and then creeps up the coast ending in a thin sliver on the Jersey coastline. I make this point simply to underscore that my experiences of winter and its associated weather is more akin to someone living in Atlanta than someone in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania - say, in a town like Punxsutawney. Having clarified this, let us proceed. February 2 - Groundhog Day - is some 47 days shy of the Spring Equinox; giving us nearly **7 weeks** to an astronomical definition for the end of winter. From an agricultural standpoint, the last frost date for my region, indicating it’s safe to plant, is April 15, which is 72 days - barring leap-years - from Groundhog Day; coming to about **10 weeks**. Now from what I can find out, if the groundhog sees its shadow that’s 6 more weeks of winter, if not, there will be less so (no one says how much less). So the question is, with spring officially off by almost 7

weeks, and with the frost date some 10 weeks away (for an area much milder than Punxsutawney), then what in the heck does it mean to have 6 *more* weeks of winter.

For further research, I browsed the Web. Not surprisingly, there are a number of web sites dedicated to Punxsutawney Phil – some more fervent than others. After diligently hunting, I uncovered a few more *facts*:

- 1) Every prognosticating groundhog in Punxsutawney is named Phil. Furthermore, the current Phil is kept well fed and well heated, so chances are he's not hibernating like his wild brethren. I quote: "The groundhog comes out of his electrically heated burrow, looks for his shadow and utters his prediction to a Groundhog Club representative in *groundhogese*. The representative then translates the prediction for the general public."

*Groundhogese?* Does this embarrass you as an intelligent adult? It does me. On the other hand, the never ending stream of Phils puts to rest a rather grisly spectacle that used to pop into my mind every year at this time. I would think to myself "How old *is* that groundhog?" One of these years, they're going to take him out of his hole and find that he cashed in his chips sometime during November. I have this mental movie of a rotted groundhog carcass pulled out by unwitting public officials on Groundhog Day to the obvious horror of the visiting crowd. People gasp. Children cry. Then the bottom half of Phil falls off.

- 2) The original prediction concerning whether we have a prolonged winter or not comes from a verse concerning Candlemas Day, which is February 2. The verse (some say Latin, others early Christian, and others Scottish) is:

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

This appears to be built on the tried and true *rain, rain go away* theory – if it's a cloudy day on February 2, winter skips town immediately. I assume the climate was a bit milder where this rhyme was created, making the Scots as authors a bit of a long shot.

The end result: Groundhog Day has nothing to do with groundhogs or hedgehogs or even anteaters for that matter. And, 6 weeks lacks any significance as a time-frame. For 110 years in this country, we have taken one tiny bit of sing-song ignorance and enlarged it up to an idiocy of truly gigantic proportions.