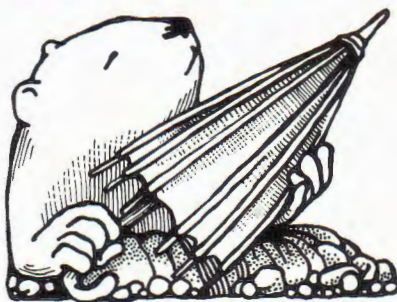


Watch that woodchuck



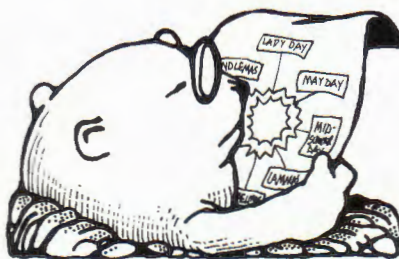
On February 2, we watch for the groundhog to emerge for reasons that originate from ancient Celtic tradition. Groundhog Day was known as *Imbolg*, or sheep's milk, a time for nurturing young sheep and planting spring crops. The belief arose that if *Imbolg* were to be sunny and clear, then winter's effects would endure, foreshadowing a long winter. However, if skies were overcast, then the warmer days of spring would arrive early. To farmers then and today, an early spring means early spring planting and a subsequent early harvest. Often fires were lit to commemorate the event as fires were a sign of warmth and light, both of which increased as days lengthened.

German immigrant farmers are credited with bringing Groundhog Day with them to the United States as they settled in Pennsylvania. To them, February 2 was called Candlemas Day, because of the practice of lighting candles on this day in celebration of early planting. The Germans believed that the badger was able to predict the weather on the basis of whether or not its shadow appeared. If the badger, or groundhog, saw its shadow on Candlemas, it would be scared and return to its burrow for another six weeks—to sleep through the long winter. However, if the skies were overcast, then no shadow would appear, and an early, warm spring

would be expected. The importance of this day to German immigrants, and its impact on their farming gave rise to the couplet

*A farmer would rather see his wife
upon a bier,
than that Candlemas Day should be
sunny and clear.*

Year after year, since 1898, crowds have gathered in Punxutawney, Pennsylvania, on February 2 to wait for a certain groundhog to emerge from its burrow. Today the belief in this as a predictor of weather is not nearly as consequential as it appears despite all the hoopla created by the news media. Yet, there is some scientific rationale to ritual, albeit not in the accuracy of the forecast. When the skies are clear, temperatures tend to be cold as the ground radiates heat absorbed during the day back into the atmosphere; and, when skies are overcast, temperatures tend to moderate as clouds trap heat nearer the ground.



Midpoints

To other cultures in the Northern Hemisphere, Candlemas Day was celebrated as the midpoint, or cross-quarter day, between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Cross-quarter days occur midway between the astronomical events that mark the beginning of each of the four seasons, the solstices and the equinoxes. The second cross-quarter day of the year, as it is calculated mathematically, occurs on May 6, although it is often associated with May Day, on May 1. The third cross-quarter day of the year is August 7, the only one of the four without a significant event associated with it.

Groundhog Day explained, in historical and astronomical terms.

Mid-autumn, the fourth cross-quarter day, occurs on the last day of October, Halloween, or as we now know it, Halloween.

Interestingly, this system of equinox, solstice, and cross-quarter days has led to some confusion as to when the seasonal midpoints and endpoints occur. For example, June 21 is the official date for the start of summer in the Northern Hemisphere, but it is sometimes referred to as midsummer's day. This would suggest that summer actually begins on May Day and ends in early August. In a similar manner, December 21, the start of winter for the Northern Hemisphere, is sometimes referred to as midwinter's day. This would imply winter actually begins at the end of October, and concludes (assuming no shadow is seen) on Groundhog Day. Will we have a long winter, or will it be short, and our spring be an early spring? No one can predict this, at least not based on seeing one's shadow. However, come this February 2, rest assured that crowds will once again gather to watch Punxutawney Phil emerge from his hole.

Evening planets

Mercury: Sets about an hour after sunset.

Venus: Sets about three hours after sunset.

Mars: High over southeastern horizon at sunset.

Moon phases

First Quarter - March 1

Full Moon - March 8

Third Quarter - March 14

New Moon - March 23

First Quarter - March 30

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