

# Groundhog Forecast

Around these parts – in the hills and “hollers” of Southeast Tennessee – spring is going to arrive early. That would be the forecast of any local groundhog who happened to thrust his head out of his hole this morning, because it was a cold, cloudy day, and rain is expected later on.

Folklore has it, of course, that on Groundhog Day, if the woodchuck – that’s what a groundhog is – sees his shadow, he scurries back into his hole, anticipating six more weeks of winter. That’s exactly what happened in the case of Punxsutawney Phil, the most famous of all groundhogs, who lives in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. When Groundhog Club President Bill Cooper tapped on Phil’s home on Gobbler’s Knob (don’t you just love these names?), the Seer of Seers saw the sun and his shadow and sent a chill through the crowd of his admirers, most of whom are tired of winter.

Punxsutawney is a town of 7,500 people about 65 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. It has been dubbed the “Weather Capital of the World” because of the groundhog tradition.

How did such a superstition get started? In Europe, centuries ago, people watched for hibernating animals, such as bears, badgers and hedgehogs, as signs of winter’s end. Germans who immigrated to Pennsylvania in the mid-1800s began keeping an eye on the groundhog. About that time, some friends in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, went into the woods on Candlemas Day to look for groundhogs. This outing became a tradition, and a local newspaper editor nicknamed the seekers “the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club.” Starting in 1887, the search became an official event centered on a groundhog called Punxsutawney Phil.

Ol’ Phil doesn’t have it too bad. Today, he lives in a climate-controlled habitat adjoining the Punxsutawney Library. A local celebrity, he gained national fame in the 1993 movie, *Groundhog Day*, which was shot in scenic Woodstock, Illinois. The weather-watching rodent’s predictions are recorded in the *Congressional Record*.

Let’s just see how accurate Phil, and his local counterparts, may be at weather forecasting. At the least, they may not be any worse than the television meteorologists.

--Beecher Hunter