

Groundhog Day

February 2 • United States and Canada



On this quirky holiday, the groundhog is our gauge to tell us if spring is nearly here. Students will love the mascot, and you can weave in a quick lesson about weather and tradition.

Holiday History

Since ancient Rome, Candlemas Day on February 2 was designated to predict the coming of spring. People believed that “If Candlemas Day is fair and clear, there’ll be two winters in the year”—meaning it would stay colder for much longer that year. In Germany, Austria, and countries across northern Europe, people watched to see if hibernating animals came out of their nests. This tradition came to America with European colonists. The German colonists in Pennsylvania watched the groundhog because it is one of the more common hibernating animals there.

★ Web Link

Check out www.groundhog.org for lots of fun groundhog lore from the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club. Students can see Phil’s predictions dating back to 1887!

Fast Fact ★ Read Aloud ★

On February 2, it is said that the groundhog comes out of its hole after hibernating all winter to see if spring is approaching. The theory is that if it sees its shadow, which means the sun is shining, there are six weeks left of winter. The groundhog returns to its hole. If it’s cloudy or rainy, there is no shadow. The groundhog takes this as a sign of the approach of spring and doesn’t return to its hole.



America Celebrates

The groundhog Punxsutawney Phil from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, is the official groundhog of Groundhog Day. People from all over the country wait each year to see if he sees his shadow.

The Groundhog’s Shadow Science

Teach students about shadows. Ask students to choose their own “groundhogs” (a stuffed animal from home or any school object). Find a sunny area on concrete or the ground where shadows will appear. Explain that a shadow is formed when an opaque object—something that’s not clear—blocks light. (If a student is having trouble seeing the shadow for his or her object, choose a tall stationary object such as a tree or flagpole.) In the morning, the sun is in the east, so the shadow should be on the west side of the groundhogs. Have students observe the direction and length of the shadow throughout the day. In the middle of the day (before lunch), the sun is highest in the sky so the shadow should be shortest. Late in the day, the shadow should be to the east of the groundhog since the sun sets in the west.

★ **Bulletin Board Idea** Let students draw pictures of their groundhogs for the bulletin board. Have them chart their shadow activity findings at various times of the day. Chart categories can include: time, location, shadow’s height, width, and direction (north, south, east, west).

★ **TIP** Students can make their own compasses on a piece of paper, which they can adjust to show which direction they are facing and set on the ground for reference. Help them use the position of the sun to orient themselves. Keep an actual compass on hand to check for accuracy. Also, bring out rulers, yard sticks, or measuring tape to measure and record the length of the shadows. Select a sunny day—which might not be February 2!—to assure a successful project.