

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

der 2. Februar—Igeltag / Hedgehog Day

Groundhog Day: *Mariä Lichtmess/Candlemas*

## Mariä Lichtmess

On February 2 Germans celebrate Mariä Lichtmess, or what others call Candlemass. It is both a religious holiday and an opportunity to predict the weather. Americans and other countries will be familiar with part of the ritual. One exception is hedge hogs.

Mariä Lichtmess is the Christian feast of Jesus being presented to the temple. It is a day of wisdom, especially relating to the weather. In Germany and in many places in Europe, February 2 is the day when nature projects the end of winter. Germans look at it from two perspectives: the weather on Mariä Lichtmess; and did der Igel – a hedgehog, see its shadow

As Germans immigrated to America, they brought traditions with them. As early as 1840, Pennsylvania documents show the celebration of Mariä Lichtmess. With no hedgehogs available, the new American citizens chose a woodchuck or ground hog.

This began the American tradition of Groundhog Day with Punxsutawney Phil seeking his shadow. If he sees it, six more weeks of winter lie ahead. This comes from the German rhyme:

*Wenn's an Lichtmess  
stürmt und schneit,  
ist der Frühling nicht mehr weit;  
ist es aber klar und hell,  
kommt der Lenz wohl nicht so schnell.*

*If Candlemass brings wind and snow,  
Then spring will very soon show.  
But if it's clear and bright,  
Then spring won't come so right.*

When traveling in Germany, or anywhere else on Mariä Lichtmess, hope for a cloudy day for all the ground hogs or hedge hogs.

February 2, *Mariä Lichtmess*—or *Candlemas*—was an official holiday in Germany until 1912. The day has also been known as *Mariä Reinigung*, *das Fest der Darstellung des Herrn*, and *Mariä Kerzenweihe*. The latter name (*Kerze* means “candle”) is related to the English “Candlemas,” with its tradition of blessing both sacred and household candles on February 2.

The American observance of Groundhog Day has its roots in this February holiday. At least as early as the 1840s, German immigrants in Pennsylvania had introduced the tradition of weather prediction that was associated with the hedgehog (*Igel*) in their homeland. Since there were no hedgehogs in the region, the Pennsylvania Germans adopted the indigenous woodchuck (a name derived from an Algonquian word), also known as the groundhog. The town of Punxsutawney has played up the custom over the years and managed to turn itself into the center of the annual Groundhog Day, particularly after the 1993 movie starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. Every year on February 2, people gather to wait to see whether a groundhog known as “Punxsutawney Phil” will see his shadow after he emerges from his burrow. If he does, the tradition says that there will be six more weeks of winter. (Unfortunately, Phil has a rather disappointing 39 percent rate of accuracy for his predictions.)

### Why Groundhog Day?

Groundhog Day was brought to America by English and German immigrants, none of them with any apparent meteorological savvy.

Granted, a sunny day in early February is likely to be an unusually cold one — the clear sky bespeaks

an Arctic air mass. Thus one could make the most tenuous of claims for a logical basis to the fantasy of Groundhog Day, this business about winter lasting another six weeks if the groundhog sees his shadow. But it's not exactly something you want to plan your spring vacation around.

You ask: Why a groundhog? The exact type of critter is optional, as long as it hibernates. In some parts of the world, it's a badger, bear or hedgehog. These creatures have an interest in knowing how long winter will last. They're getting bored. Need a shower. Suffering from wicked morning breath.