

Virtual varmint

Groundhog's prediction will be online only thanks to pandemic

At first light on the second day of every February since 1886, the Seer of Seers has emerged from his burrow on Gobbler's Knob to deliver a prognostication on what remains of the hibernal season. In other words, an overfed rodent named Phil is yanked out of his man-made den in the cold dawn to look for his shadow, which, according to legend, indicates

how much longer winter will last. This is Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney.

What was once a little, local event — no doubt inspired in part by inebriation — has grown into a spectacle attended by growing crowds, now numbering in the tens of thousands.

"Groundhog Day," the popular 1993 movie starring Bill Murray, raised the profile of the festival and boosted attendance thereafter.

I don't know if groundhogs are susceptible to COVID-19, but the Groundhog Day festivities definitely are. Like so many other annual traditions that bring people together, Punxsutawney Phil has been forced to take his act online. The Inner Circle, which is the group of black top hat and coat-wearing gentlemen who manage Phil's affairs, will still gather on the knob to interpret his forecast. But the adoring crowds will not be allowed to witness it in person. Instead, it will be live streamed on groundhog.org, the official website for the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club.

The website usually functions as a marketing tool to attract and inform visitors for the annual event. It has information on local lodging, dining, related activities, attractions, history and more. All of that information is still on the site, but this year it will be

offering online activities that fans can participate in remotely instead of inviting people to come to town.

The main event will still be Phil emerging to look for his shadow. While you can't be there in person, you can purchase a life-size photo cutout of yourself, or a loved one, that will be set up in the "audience" at Gobbler's Knob. There's also an online scavenger hunt you can participate in using the **Eventzee app**, which is available in the Apple App Store and Google's Play Store. The site also partnered with **Cameo**, a website that sends video greetings from celebrities for a fee. You can buy a personalized greeting from Phil for the woodchuck aficionados in your life.

There usually is a live talent show as part of the annual festivities. It will still be held this year, but participants will have to submit videos of their acts online instead of coming to town to perform. The site has all the details on how to do that, as well as a gallery of submitted acts you can vote for.

There are numerous activities for children that can be done with resources available on the site. There's a groundhog cookie recipe, coloring pages and lessons on letters, numbers, vocabulary, shadows and more. Kids also can email questions about Groundhog Day and Phil, or send in related pictures they've drawn. Teachers can schedule a class Zoom meeting with Phil and a member of the Inner Circle.

I'm sure none of the virtual activities can compare with actually going to Punxsutawney to partake in person, but the town could probably use your support. They seem like a fun-loving bunch who take Groundhog Day seriously, but not too seriously.

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