

Groundhog Day: Howell woodchuck Woody a whiz at predicting spring

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Woody the Woodchuck isn't as famous as Punxsutawney Phil, but the Howell resident is more accurate predicting the weather.

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Woody the Woodchuck isn't as famous as Punxsutawney Phil, but the Howell resident is more accurate predicting the weather. (Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News)

Howell— Pity Woody the Woodchuck.

While she compiles an estimable record predicting the weather on Groundhog Day, which is Sunday, her vainglorious cousin, Punxsutawney Phil, continually hogs all the headlines.

Few people outside Michigan have ever heard of Woody, who lives at the Howell Conference & Nature Center. To be honest, few inside the state know about her, either.

Why, it's enough to make a groundhog grunt and chatter its teeth, which is what they do when they're disgruntled.

But not Woody.

The Michigan marmot takes her annual slight in stride, showing none of the peckish behavior her ilk is known for, center director Dana DeBenham said.

"She's fun and personable," DeBenham said.

Still, would it kill Michiganians to show a little love for the friendly fur ball?

In Pennsylvania, the governor attends a two-day shindig surrounding Punxsutawney Phil's prognostication on Groundhog Day.

In Michigan, not even the mayor of Howell has had the pleasure of making Woody's acquaintance. Hizzoner Phil Campbell also thought she was a he.

To be fair, the center wasn't sure about Woody's gender when she arrived in 1999, which is how she ended up with a male name.

"If all they have to do in Pennsylvania is look at a groundhog, there must not be a whole lot to do there," harrumphed Dick Grant, center executive director.

The folks at the Howell center will tell you weather-telling woodchucks are rooted in deep science. Scientists will say it's a German superstition.

Either way, every Groundhog Day, Woody is plucked from her heated kennel at the center and plopped into a papier-mache tree stump. Peanuts and bananas are spread outside a stump door.

If she stays inside or comes out for less than 30 seconds, it means Michigan will have six more weeks of winter. If she comes out and lingers, we'll have an early spring.

It's all hocus-pocus, but Woody has been right 11 of 15 times since 1999, center officials said. That's a 73 percent accuracy rate.

Punxsutawney Phil has been right 46 of 117 times, a paltry 39 percent, according to StormFax, a weather website.

Phil's handlers claim he has never been wrong, arguing that, in America's disparate weather zones, his forecasts are correct somewhere in the country.

"That's quite a disclaimer," Grant said. "We don't let Woody get away with that."

He credits Woody's superiority to her gender.

Among groundhogs, just like humans, females carry most of the load, Grant said. They're responsible for finding places to live, making nests and raising a family.

Woody's obscurity may have something to do with her late start. By the time she began predicting the weather in 1999, Punxsutawney Phil had already turned it into a cottage industry.

Phil and his progeny, who began predicting in 1886, have drawn as many as 20,000 people, some as far away as Japan and Australia, to their small town in western Pennsylvania.

Punxsutawney has hayrides, scavenger hunts, whittling exhibitions and screenings of "Groundhog Day," and sells everything from hats and T-shirts to knickknacks and groundhog jerky. Ten couples a year get married there.

By comparison, Howell has a crazy outfit contest for kids.

"I don't know about you but, if I'm going to bet on a groundhog, I will bet on a Michigan groundhog," Grant said.

Woody has come far from her introduction in 1999 when five people — three center workers and two reporters — watched her emerge from a hole the center had dug in the side of a hill. She now draws up to 150 people on Groundhog Day.

Woody even made some national news in 2006 when Grant, describing the difference between the genders, talked about the males' propensity to wander into traffic after mating.

Not that Woody would ever want that to happen to Phil.

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