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GROUNDHOGS

The Truth Comes Out

by Julia Andrews; art by Dave Clegg

Hey, all you groundhogs out there, rise and shine! It's February 2—your big day! What? You're still snoozing? What's going on here?

You've probably heard the story: Groundhogs are supposed to come out of their burrows on Groundhog Day and look for their shadows. If they see them, it means there will be six more weeks of winter. No shadows means spring is near.

But guess what—most groundhogs are fast asleep on February 2. So, what about

Punxsutawney Phil, that furry guy you may see on TV that day? Phil is really a tame groundhog from a zoo. Wild groundhogs may not wake up for a few more weeks. And when they *do* leave their burrows, they're not looking for shadows. They're looking for mates and food.

Want to find out what groundhogs are *really* up to all year long? Then turn the page!

WINTER

BEATING THE COLD

Groundhogs (or woodchucks, as lots of people call them) often live where winters can be cold and snowy. The plants that groundhogs need for food are dead or covered up. So groundhogs *hibernate* underground in a burrow. The

burrow also provides great protection from enemies.

HIBERNATION STATION

As winter nears, a groundhog gets its burrow ready for hibernation. It gathers lots of dried plants and makes a thick, soft nest. Then the groundhog curls up for a very long, very deep winter's sleep.

NEARLY DEAD

When a groundhog hibernates, its body temperature drops as low as 37° F (3° C)—just above freezing. Its heart beats only four or five times a minute, and

it breathes only once every four minutes. With its body slowed down, the groundhog can go without food or water for almost five months. (More on that later.)

A FREE MOTEL

While a groundhog is having a long winter snooze, other creatures may sneak into its burrow to find shelter from the cold or to hide from enemies. Mice, chipmunks, squirrels, opossums, skunks, raccoons, toads, lizards, spiders, and other creatures all spend some time—or even all winter—in a groundhog's burrow.

SUMMER

FAMILY LIFE

Male groundhogs are the first to come out of their dens in the spring. They search nearby burrows for females but usually meet other males. Then they may have a biting fight! Females wake up about three weeks after

the males do. Pairs mate, and a month later teeny, hairless pups are born.

Growing groundhog pups like to tussle and play games. Mom sometimes joins the fun. But she also has to keep looking out for foxes and other predators. If she sees one, she whistles a shrill alarm call. That tells the pups, "Dive into the burrow, NOW!"

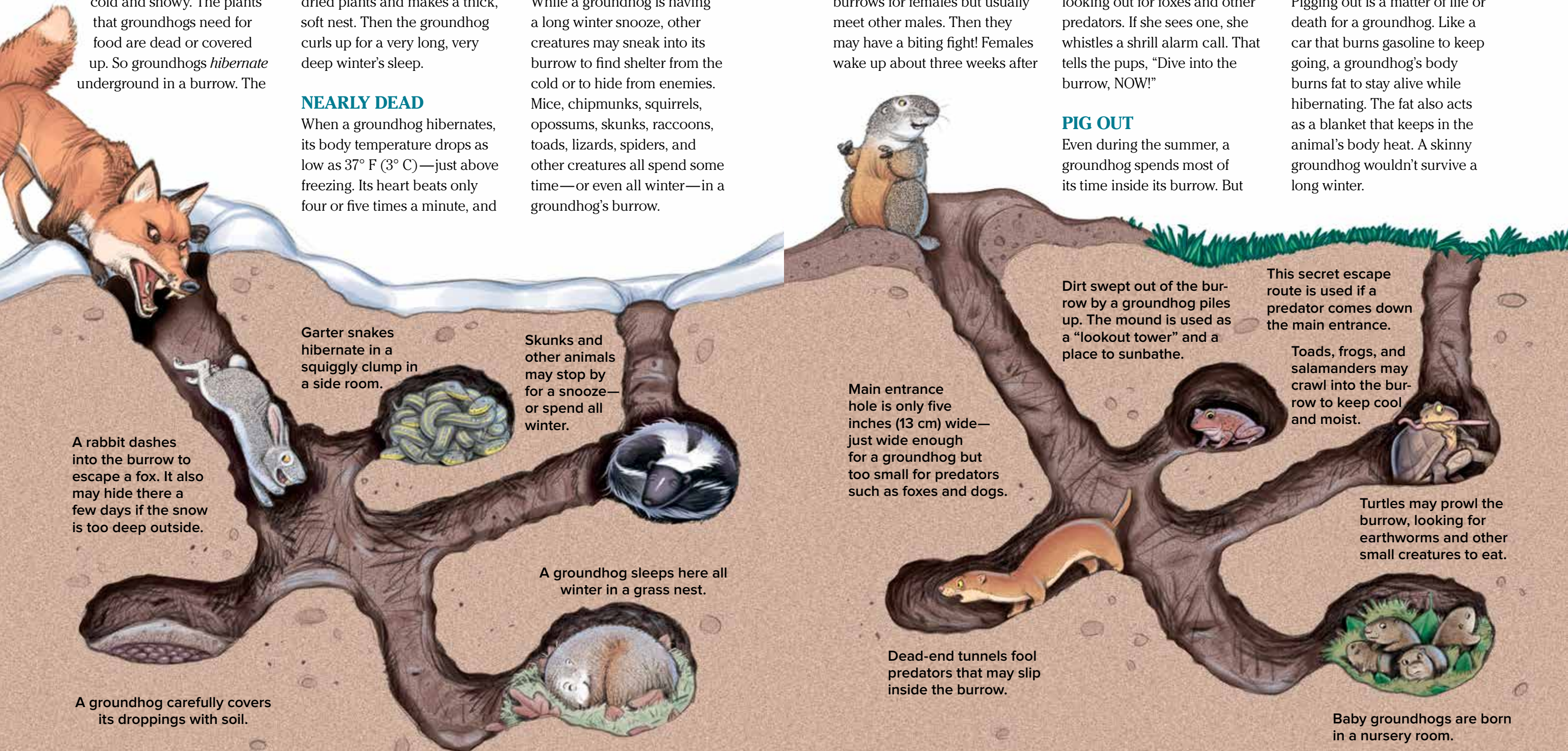
PIG OUT

Even during the summer, a groundhog spends most of its time inside its burrow. But

when it's outside, it eats like a little pig. It scarfs down at least a pound of greens a day. By summer's end, the groundhog has doubled its weight.

PIG IN A BLANKET

Pigging out is a matter of life or death for a groundhog. Like a car that burns gasoline to keep going, a groundhog's body burns fat to stay alive while hibernating. The fat also acts as a blanket that keeps in the animal's body heat. A skinny groundhog wouldn't survive a long winter.



A rabbit dashes into the burrow to escape a fox. It also may hide there a few days if the snow is too deep outside.

Garter snakes hibernate in a squiggly clump in a side room.

Skunks and other animals may stop by for a snooze—or spend all winter.

A groundhog sleeps here all winter in a grass nest.

A groundhog carefully covers its droppings with soil.

Main entrance hole is only five inches (13 cm) wide—just wide enough for a groundhog but too small for predators such as foxes and dogs.

Dead-end tunnels fool predators that may slip inside the burrow.

Dirt swept out of the burrow by a groundhog piles up. The mound is used as a "lookout tower" and a place to sunbathe.

This secret escape route is used if a predator comes down the main entrance.

Toads, frogs, and salamanders may crawl into the burrow to keep cool and moist.

Turtles may prowl the burrow, looking for earthworms and other small creatures to eat.

Baby groundhogs are born in a nursery room.



NAME GAME

You can probably guess how such a fat creature came to be called a groundhog. But groundhogs aren't little pigs—they're *rodents*, like mice, rats, beavers,

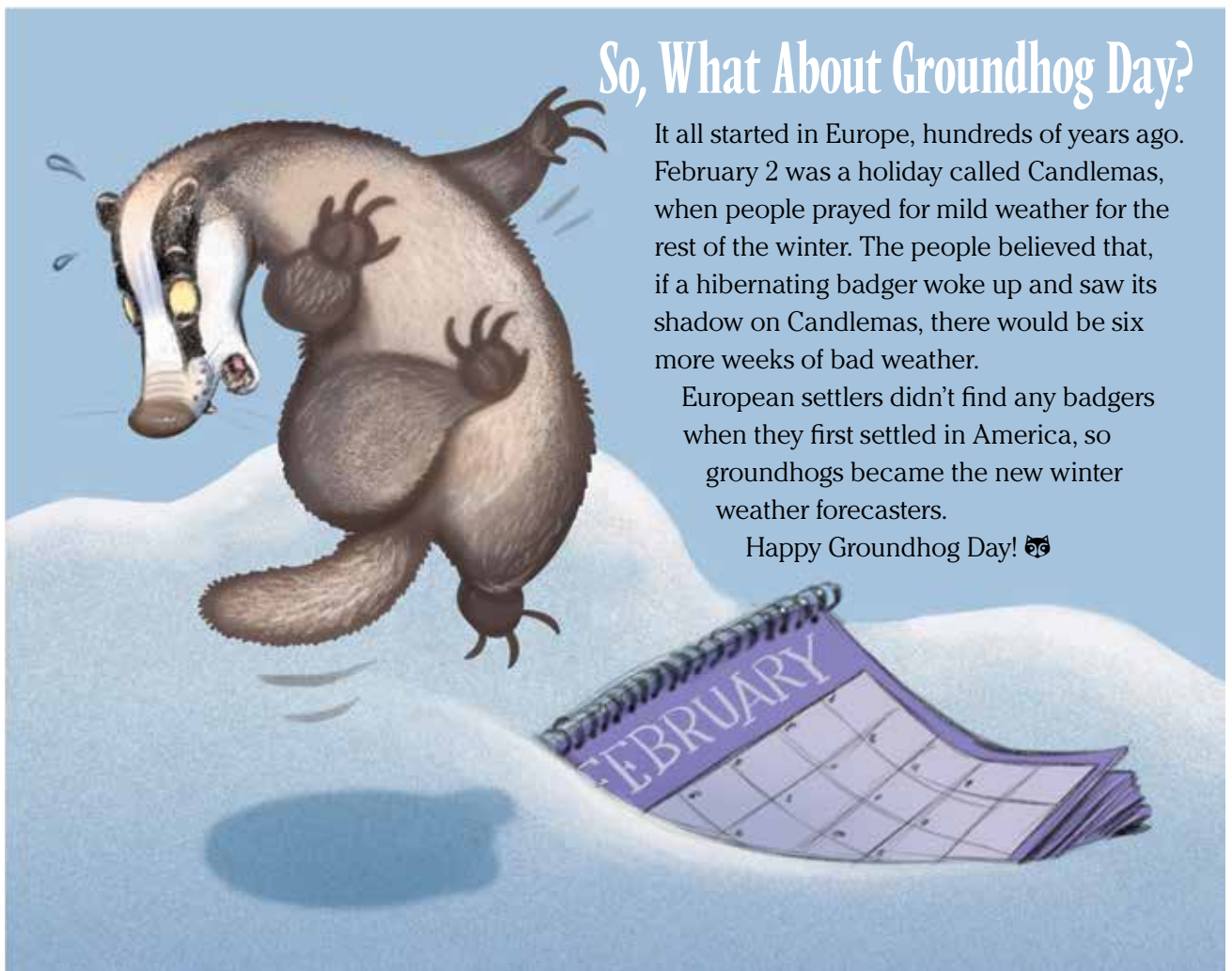
and squirrels. Their closest rodent cousins are marmots, which are found in the western U.S., in Europe, and in Asia.

American Indians called groundhogs a name that

sounded like “wuchak,” which means “digger.” European settlers thought they were saying “woodchuck.”

WOODCHUCK CHUCKING

So how much wood *would* a woodchuck chuck, if a woodchuck could chuck wood? No one knows. But we *do* know that a groundhog chucks soil, and plenty of it. A full-grown groundhog can dig a 12-foot (4-m) burrow in only a few hours. When building a full-size burrow, a groundhog may clear out 700 pounds (320 kg) of soil!



So, What About Groundhog Day?

It all started in Europe, hundreds of years ago. February 2 was a holiday called Candlemas, when people prayed for mild weather for the rest of the winter. The people believed that, if a hibernating badger woke up and saw its shadow on Candlemas, there would be six more weeks of bad weather.

European settlers didn't find any badgers when they first settled in America, so groundhogs became the new winter weather forecasters.

Happy Groundhog Day! 🐻