



UP THE CREEK

February 1, 2011

If it's cold, it must be February. Our mom's warning that "As the days lengthen, the cold strengthens," is proved year after year, and yet year after year, we dig in our heels and refuse to accept the truth of it. We guess it'll probably be cold when you get this letter, as it is being written in the last week of January – a month that has made it impossible to imagine anything warm ever happening again. In fact, through today (25th), January has been the coldest month we have recorded here at our little NOAA-sanctioned weather observatory. The 21-degree average temperature is five degrees colder than last year. That's after we were sandbagged by the warmest December in our record, at 34 degrees.

But we realize that such homemade statistics don't have any predictive value. Which is why we rely on the national groundhog, viz. Punxsutawney Phil for the definitive February prognostication. He is correct at least 50% of the time, and that is an acceptable record, even in the era of supercomputers and their production of weather models which have advanced the science of weather forecasting to the point where the three-day outlook may often be relied on. We plan to keep an eye on the possible casting of a shadow by Phil, which will mean nasty, or the absence of same, which will mean nastier, so that in either case, February is sure to be noxious and Phil will again be proven right. Maybe his record is really 100%.

It's understandable that the calendar of Romulus in 753 BC omitted the months of January and February. Ten months with 304 days was enough of a year for Romulus, and who needed winter anyway? Unfortunately, he only got away with it for about forty years, whereupon Numa Pompilius created January and February, containing 57 days between them. Numa then subtracted six days from some of the other months, and the new day count per year became 355. Over the following centuries, Julius Cesar and Pope Gregory XIII nudged the total up to the current 365.2425 days, rounded off to 365 and adjusted to the real solar year by adding leap days in an "intercalation" system that some people claim to understand.

None of which precisely explains why February is an uninhabitable month, except that it is a prelude to spring, the worst season. Whoever wrote enthusiastic songs and poetry about springtime wasn't from here. "Springtime in the Rockies?" Right. 'Tis the season of broken promises, an overt display of cynicism by Mother Nature, her heart and mind having iced up during winter. Walk outside lightly dressed on a sunny day, and you will find yourself smote by wind-driven sleet ten minutes later. Turn off the no-freeze-em-up water drip you have maintained over the winter, and your pipes will crack and spew the very next night. Verily, the only month worse than February is March, or maybe April, which can be truly treacherous. At least February doesn't pretend.

Oh, if you are motivated to look up any of the "facts" presented above with regard to calendars, I'll save you the effort. They are sure to be false, because they were obtained from that ubiquitous do-it-yourself internet encyclopedia known as "Wikipedia," the least reliable source of information that has yet been invented. Articles are written, corrected, and re-corrected by warring contributors whose knowledge of the subject matter often falls foul of political or social agendas. The major skill of many of them seems to be a wondrous ability to make stuff up. Yes, I'm jealous.