

# July – “Dog Days of Summer” and History

## What Are the Dog Days of Summer?

“**Dog Days**” considered to be from July 3 to August 11, marking a period of particularly hot and humid weather. This term originates from the ancient belief that the rising of the Dog Star, Sirius, coincided with the hottest days of summer.

*Dog Days bright and clear  
Indicate a happy year;  
But when accompanied by rain,  
For better times, our hopes are vain.*

In ancient Greece and Rome, the Dog Days were believed to be a time of drought, bad luck, and unrest, when dogs and men alike would be driven mad by the extreme heat! Today, the phrase doesn’t conjure up such bad imagery. Instead, the Dog Days are associated purely with the time of summer’s peak temperatures and humidity.

## Why Are They Called the “Dog Days” of Summer?

- This period of sweltering weather coincides with the year’s heliacal (meaning “at sunrise”) rising of [Sirius, the Dog Star](#). Sirius is part of the constellation Canis Majoris—the “Greater Dog”—which is where Sirius gets its canine nickname, as well as its official name, Alpha Canis Majoris. Sirius is the brightest star in the sky, not including our own Sun.
- In ancient Greece, Egypt, and Rome, it was believed that Sirius’s dawn rising in mid- to late summer contributed to the extreme weather of the season. In other words, the “combined heat” of super-bright Sirius and our Sun was thought to be the cause of summer’s sweltering temperatures. The name “Sirius” even stems from the Ancient Greek *seirios*, meaning “scorching.”
- For the ancient Egyptians, Sirius’s dawn rising (known to them as Sothis) also coincided with the Nile River’s flood season. They used the star as a “watchdog” for that event.
- Of course, the appearance of Sirius does not actually affect seasonal weather here on Earth, but its appearance during the hottest part of summer ensures that the lore surrounding the star lives on today!

## The Brightest Star in the Sky



Sirius is the brightest star in the sky if you don’t count our own Sun. Under the right conditions, it can even be seen with the naked eye during the day. Sirius is one star in a group of stars that form the constellation Canis Major, meaning “Greater Dog.” It’s no surprise, then, that the nickname of this big, bold star became “the Dog Star.”

Given that Sirius is the brightest star in the sky, it’s not hard to find. Learn how to [find the Dog Star in the night sky here](#).

Sirius, the Dog Star, is the brightest star in the sky.

### The Dog Star in Ancient Egypt

In ancient Egypt, the Nile River flooded each year, usually beginning in late June. The people welcomed this event, called the **Inundation**, because the floodwaters brought rich soil needed to grow crops in what was otherwise a desert.

No one in Egypt knew exactly when the flooding would start, but they noticed a coincidence that gave them a clue: The water began to rise on the days when Sirius (known to them as **Sothis**) began to rise before the Sun. Sothis and the Inundation became so important to the Egyptians’ survival that they began their new year with the new Moon that followed the star’s first appearance on the eastern horizon.



### A Time of Ill Fortune?

Unlike the Egyptians, the ancient Greeks and Romans were not as pleased by Sirius's appearance. For them, Sirius signaled a time when evil was brought to their lands in the form of drought, disease, or discomfort.

Virgil, the Roman poet, wrote in the *Aeneid* that "fiery Sirius, bringer of drought and plague to frail mortals, rises and saddens the sky with sinister light."

Is this just superstition? A 2009 Finnish study tested the traditional claim that the rate of infections is higher during Dog Days. The authors wrote, "This study was conducted in order to challenge the myth that the rate of infections is higher during the dog days. To our surprise, the myth was found to be true."

### Dog Days of Summer Folklore

Old-timers believed that rainfall on the Dog Days was a bad omen, as foretold in this verse:

*Dog Days bright and clear*

*Indicate a happy year;*

*But when accompanied by rain,*

*For better times, our hopes are vain.*

"Dog Days are approaching; you must, therefore, make both hay and haste while the Sun shines, for when old Sirius takes command of the weather, he is such an unsteady, crazy dog, there is no dependence upon him."

—*The Old Farmer's Almanac*, 1817

The Old Farmer's Almanac <https://www.almanac.com/content/what-are-dog-days-summer>

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### The Surprising History of July

One famous festival began as a way to drive off angry, disease-spreading spirits.

There's a lot to celebrate in July: [Independence Day](#), summer vacations filled with camping, swimming, barbecues and picnics—and of course, [National Ice Cream Month](#), designated by former President [Ronald Reagan](#) in 1984. Named after [Julius Caesar](#), July is a time of solar spectacles, historical drama and ancient traditions. Here's a look at some of the month's more unusual claims to fame.

#### The Origins of July

- July owes its name to Julius Caesar, who [reformed the calendar](#) in 46 B.C. Following his death in 44 B.C, his birth month was designated July in his honor. Previously, it was known as Quintilis, meaning "the fifth month" in the old [Roman calendar](#), before January and February were added.
- Full Moons, Meteors and Zodiac Shifts
- July's full moon, the "[Buck Moon](#)," was named by Native American tribes and signifies the time when male deer sport fully grown velvety antlers. During the month, the zodiac shifts from Cancer, symbolizing home and nurturing, to Leo, representing strength and leadership, marking a cosmic energy shift.
- Among July's celestial displays is the [Delta Aquariids meteor shower](#), which typically starts mid-July and sends around 20 "shooting stars" (aka meteoroids) across the sky per hour.
- Natural Cycles: Agriculture and Symbolic Flowers
- In agrarian societies, July marked the peak of wheat and barley harvests, essential for breadmaking and trade. In Native American farming, it was prime time for the "[Three Sisters](#)" crops of corn, beans and squash, along with bailing hay. The saying "[knee high by the Fourth of July](#)" once indicated high corn yields, but now the lyric from the *Oklahoma!* musical, "The corn is as high as an elephant's eye," may be more fitting, as mid-July corn can reach about 8 feet tall.
- July also brings peak summer blooms, with water lilies (symbolizing innocence) and larkspur (representing positivity) serving as the month's [traditional birth flowers](#). Both have ties to [Greek](#)

[mythology](#): The botanical name for water lilies, Nymphaeaceae, links to water nymphs, while larkspurs sprang from where the blood of the mythical Greek warrior Ajax was spilled at the Battle of Troy.

- Fascinating Historical Events
- In July 1518, the "[dancing plague](#)" in Strasbourg saw 400 people dancing uncontrollably, attributed to "hot blood." Its origins remain mysterious, often linked to medieval superstitions about St. Vitus, a vengeful figure who was said to have inflicted a dancing curse on those who displeased him. Historians point to several other possible causes, including stress from disease and famine, accidental ergot poisoning or the involvement of a religious cult.
- Many may be familiar with France's [Bastille Day](#), held each July 14, but the lesser-known [July Revolution of 1830](#) marks a French rebellion that led to the overthrow of Bourbon King Charles X and the rise of Louis-Philippe as the Citizen King.
- And summer weather played a role in the July 10, 1943, launch of [Operation Husky](#), the massive Allied invasion of Sicily during World War II. The assault, which mobilized 150,000 troops, 3,000 ships and 4,000 aircraft, had been timed to take advantage of good weather, but unexpected storms nearly canceled it.
- July's Lost Holidays and Famous Festivals
- The Romans celebrated July—and the sun god Apollo—with the [Ludi Apollinares](#), or Apollonian Games, which featured chariot races, religious processions, animal hunts and dramatic performances. They also held the [Neptunalia](#) festival each July 23, honoring Neptune by building temporary huts to host feasts and revelry.
- And in the U.K., July 15 is [St. Swithin's Day](#), an English folklore tradition based on the tale of moving the remains of the bishop of Winchester from a grave to an indoor shrine in 971. Torrential rains came on that day, and legend made it a Groundhog Day-style event: Rain on July 15 predicts 40 days of wet weather ahead, while a dry day promises 40 days without rain.
- Throughout July, Kyoto, Japan holds its largest and most famous festival, the Gion Matsuri, which originated in A.D. 869 to appease the gods during a plague. To chase away angry spirits spreading disease during Kyoto's hot, humid summers, the emperor called for a procession of halberds and portable shrines. Over the centuries, the tradition evolved into a parade of elaborate floats, some as tall as seven stories high and many featuring musicians playing traditional instruments. Each year, a local boy is chosen as the festival's sacred messenger to the gods; by superstition, his feet are not allowed to touch the ground from July 13 until the end of the main parade on July 17.
- July's Animal Mascot (Historically Speaking)
- The "dog days of summer," those scorching weeks from July 3 to August 11, mark the time when Sirius, the "dog star," rises with the sun. Ancient Greeks and Romans [believed](#) Sirius caused the month's intense heat, leading to madness in people and dogs.
- Today, the phrase also describes challenging times, seen in cultural references like Charles Dickens's description of Ebenezer Scrooge ("He iced his coffee in the dog-days, and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas."), Florence and the Machine's song "Dog Days Are Over" and the crime-caper-gone-wrong film *Dog Day Afternoon*.
- [The Surprising History of July](#)