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Merry Christmas, happy holidays, and season's greetings to you all. This is such a fun and joyful time of year. We get to watch the happy faces as children receive their gifts. The season can be such an enriching time for all those involved. Even at the zoo, the animal caretakers will frequently put out some extra enrichment in the form of treats and "toys" for the animals around the holidays. The animals might not understand the occasion, but they enjoy it all the same.

There is no reason to not involve the animals in your family as well. Get some extra stockings and put some dog, kitty, or other treats and toys in there for your furry, feathered, or scaly family members. This was a tradition in my home growing up. The family dog and cat had their own names sewn into the stockings. We all enjoyed opening our gifts, then when we were done the pets opened theirs. Everyone would sit and enjoy watching the animals' enjoyment. We'd play tug of war with Tippy, the dog, or have Megan, the cat, chase a toy on a pole. The thing about gifts is that surprises can be fun no matter your species.

Animals not only can receive gifts for Christmas, they can be gifts for Christmas. This can be rewarding and exciting as well. Some people may have heard, there is an increase in animals going to shelters after Christmas; studies show this is a myth. In fact, pets received as gifts have a higher retention rate, but that doesn't mean they should be given lightly. The studies do tell us what the main factors associated with relinquishing pets are: inappropriate expectations, lack of regular vet care, and not attending obedience classes. In other words, go into the commitment with eyes wide open. That's it. Do the research and know what to expect from the pet. Add training classes as part of the gift. Be prepared for the behaviors that the animals have. Birds call out, dogs bark, cats sharpen their claws, etc. Understanding why animals do the things they do helps to minimize and guide the behaviors in your home. Accepting the animal behaviors and learning how to use positive training to guide the behavior goes much further to keeping the whole family together.

Don't stop the research at how to care for the animal. Also, research the animal's background. What are the laws regarding pets in your area? Each community has their own rules and following those rules can save money and heartache. If buying from a breeder, is it someplace that properly breeds and cares for the animals they are bringing into this world? Knowing the breeder can minimize the chances of heartache and veterinary bills due to genetic conditions. If you choose an animal from a shelter, what behaviors has it displayed? What do they know about its previous life? Many exotic species are going extinct because of pet trades. Was the animal caught from the wild? Knowing where the animal comes from helps you and wild populations. So do your research and go ahead and give the gift that keeps giving.

I know this holiday season my wife and I will be spoiling our nonhuman family members. If you are adding a new member to your home this holiday, don't forget to make and fill a stocking for them. Just keep it hidden or out of reach so you don't spoil the surprise for the rest of the family.