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ASK THE ER VET!

Blaire Burggren, DVM
Olympia Pet Emergency

Dear Oly Pet ER:

We're having family over for a few weeks over the holidays and we're decorating! Are there certain things we should keep in mind to keep our pets safe? Are there any decorations or goodies we should avoid? We're excited to host our family, but we're worried about keeping our animals safe and happy, too!

Dear "Overwhelmed:"

Your question is a good one! All holidays have specific items and traditions that can be dangerous to our four-legged family members. I'll touch on some highlights here, holiday by holiday:

Many of us associate Thanksgiving with food (or overindulgence)! Foods such as fatty leftovers, turkey bones, chocolate, nuts, and bread dough are in abundance and can cause serious health risks to pets if they are exposed. Additionally, alcohol, and prescription and recreational drugs may be around and do present a significant risk.

Christmas may be the most concerning of holidays due to the variety of toxic plants (poinsettia, holly, mistletoe, and the Christmas tree itself) and decorations (tinsel, potpourri, ornaments, ribbon, and candles).

Although a slowly dropping, well-lit large red apple

is not toxic itself, alcohol and fireworks are the main concerns associated with New Year's Eve.

I hope this brief list provides you with a starting point when planning ahead for this holiday season. Family gatherings are exciting, but pets have a unique role in the family and their needs and safety sometimes get overlooked with all of the excitement. The take-home message is to plan ahead and be prepared. Avoid what dangers you can and have a brief conversation about your pet's needs and safety as part of your family gathering. An example: "Remember Grandpa, Fluffy is not allowed to have any scraps this year, and please don't leave any chocolate out where she could get to it." Finally, have the phone number and hours of operation of your primary care practice documented, and a pet poison control service's and your local emergency practice's number handy.

Think ahead so "Yule" be safe!

Oly Pet ER

The Squaxin Island Tribe: one of the only Indian reservations in the country with an animal control officer.

It's no wonder that dogs come running and jump into Gus Nilsson's vehicle when he drives up. According to the dogs who know Gus, he's more of a canine "Santa Paws" or "ice cream man" than he is code enforcer – and that's just the way he likes it. Gus, who is a Tribal Housing Enforcement Officer, wears many hats for his job, but none more important than his role as tribal animal control officer. While it's not his "official" job title, the animals who live within the reservation of the Squaxin Island Tribe would tend to disagree.

Gus, who was a military sentry dog instructor during the Vietnam era, subsequently spent 42 years as a Washington State Patrolman. "The longest in their history," he said. These days, it's his work with animals that's earning the praise of humans and canines alike.

"When I first started as the housing enforcement officer, I saw a 140-pound dog walking down the street," he said. "I was scared to death."

Gus shares his home with a Lab, a retriever, and a poodle, and rather than turn away with fear, he realized that he could do something to help both free-roaming animals and the people within his community. "I went to the store and got several bags of dog biscuits," he recalled. "I'd walk up to the dogs who were tied up on their property, speak to them, and offer biscuits. I was like the popsicle guy for these dogs. Now I go around every day and give them treats. They know me and look forward to these visits."

Gus used to use his own money to buy the dog treats, but he now has a budget specifically for this important item. "Every dog catcher should make friends with the dogs in their area," he advised. "Get to know the dogs and their temperament. I've been here for two years now and they all know me."

And when dogs do get loose, they don't hesitate to come to him when he arrives. "All I have to do is open the front door to my car and they just jump right in," he said, laughing. "On a typical day, I come into the office, fill out my time sheet, and then get my vehicle filled with doggy treats," Gus said with a laugh. "It's like a little town up here. There are 120 homes. I know where all the dogs are. I drive around, they see me coming, wake up, and jump up. I pet them and play with them and give them treats, then drive over to the next dog."

Gus, who collaborates with Amy Loudermilk and her nonprofit, Rez Animal, has found that this partnership has greatly impacted the community.

"Amy came up for a clinic this summer," he said. "All of the dogs got free shots and Amy gave me a vehicle full of dog food. I went around and gave it to the tribal members. Rez Animal's program allows tribal members to pay a \$5 co-pay for medical services for their animals, and then Rez Animal picks up the rest of the bill," he said. While there were 34 applications for help last year, there have been 65 applications as of this writing.

"People are becoming more aware of the program," Gus said, "and the tribal members really appreciate what I do."

While Gus is humble about his role, he saves lives every day – and his position is as unique as it is important.

"The Squaxin Island Tribe is one of the only Indian reservations in the country that have an animal control officer," explained Amy. "City-operated shelters don't serve Indian reservations, so without animal control, stray animals are left to fend for themselves. It's very common to see

stray, skinny, and mangy animals on reservations. They're called 'rez dogs,' and without an animal control officer, they're left to run around without anyone to help."

There are 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington State and 567 tribes in the United States. "I can tell you very few have animal control," Amy said. "The fact that the Squaxin Island Tribe is doing something about this is a really big deal. You don't see stray dogs everywhere like you do on other reservations. Gus ensures that strays are picked up and taken to animal rescue organizations. He's talking to tribal members about not keeping their pets without shelter or tied on a short leash. He checks on pets and makes sure their being fed or getting medical attention."

Gus works closely with Adopt A Pet in Shelton, where he takes animals if they need to be impounded. "Adopt A Pet is the best animal organization I've ever seen," he said. "It's like a farm – the kennel floors are all heated. It's so clean that you could eat off the floors. I'll take the puppies up there and they'll get them spayed and neutered and help get them adopted out. Adopt A Pet is devoted to helping homeless dogs and find responsible homes."

When the tribes heard about Adopt A Pet's efforts to help tribal animals find homes, they were inspired to donate money to the organization and continue this impactful collaboration. Thank you, Gus and Amy, for your dedication to the animals!

Rez Animal helps animals on the Nisqually, Squaxin, Skokomish, Chehalis, and Shoalwater Bay Indian reservations. Learn more about Rez Animal – including how you can support their lifesaving work – at www.rezanimals.com.

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