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Who Invited the Dog?

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Getty Images

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER Your pet may be part of your family, but isn't asking your hosts for that glass of wine going a bit far?

By JOYCE WADLER and ABBY AGUIRRE
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IT was a dark and stormy night — actually four stormy nights — when Jayme Otto, 31, and her husband, Ryan Otto, 33, drove 1,200 miles from their home in Boulder, Colo., to her parents' house in Cleveland for Christmas.

Readers' Comments

What do you think of people taking their pets to social gatherings?
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"We traveled all this way to bring our yellow Labrador, Cody Bear, home to spend time with his grandparents," Ms. Otto said, "grandparents" being dog-person-speak for her parents.

COMMENTS (73)

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Besides wanting Cody Bear "to participate in his favorite yearly activity of unwrapping gifts and destroying all the boxes," as Ms. Otto put it, they wanted the dog to meet her brother's fiancée.

But on Christmas morning, a commotion ensued: the fiancée was allergic to dogs and broke out in hives.

"The dog was banished to the guest bedroom and we were unable to share our Christmas morning with Cody Bear," Ms. Otto said bitterly. "The family blowup between my brother and I over the dog resulted in my mother not speaking to me for two months and my brother for four." This Christmas will mark the first time that the Ottos will not be returning home.

Where, one might ask at times like these, are the elegantly embossed cards people really need, ones reading: "I can't believe I could have been so insensitive." Or better yet, "I can't believe *you* could have been so insensitive."

They might also include a sketch of a sophisticated, well-traveled pet. Something for an animal that understands, even if others do not, that it is a valued family member. And of course a handwritten note, the tone bemused but firm.

"Rex is truly sorry he sent Granny to the emergency room with the oxygen mask, but it isn't like anyone told me she was allergic. All is forgiven, see you next New

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Year's. Leaps and Gloppy Drooly Kisses — R.”

Difficult guests are no longer limited to humans. The boundaries between humans and animals have been so eaten away by pet therapists, pet designer outfits and pet bar mitzvahs, that it has reached a point where devoted owners, who treat their animals as privileged children, lose all perspective on the pet's role in their social lives.

More American households have pets than ever — 68.7 million of them in 2006, according to a new survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association, up 12.4 percent from 2001.

Among dog owners, 53.5 percent considered their pets to be members of the family, the survey found. For cats, the number was 49.2 percent.

And the term “family member” should not be used lightly. Ari Henry Barnes, who works in a New York law firm, is so devoted to his cat, Romeo, that he wipes the animal's behind every time he does “a stinky boom boom.”

When the cat became an extended houseguest at the home of good friends, Mr. Barnes found it stressful, because despite his wishes, the cat was allowed outside. “I think anybody who is taking care of someone else's child or pet, they should protect the parent's wishes.”

Many four-legged family members are routine travelers.

Derek Welsh, the president of www.bringyourpet.com, a “pet-friendly” hotel and lodging directory, estimates the number at roughly 10 million a year.

Mr. Welsh also said that in a Bring Your Pet survey of 100,000 self-selected pet owners, 38.5 percent said they had difficulty finding pet-friendly lodging.

This means there's a very good chance they may be visiting soon. And so, for animal owners and those on the hosting end of the equation, a guide.

OMITTING THE WORDS ‘PLUS ONE DOG’ ON THE INVITATION WAS NOT A PRINTER'S ERROR

A legion of two animal experts interviewed agreed that taking an unexpected animal to a party is impolite. “You never spring a doggy or any other uninvited guest on a host,” said Claudia Kawczynska, the editor in chief of Bark magazine. “If you do get a green light, bring a lot of treats for both your dog and the human host.”

What if the owner cannot bear to leave the dog at home?

“Many pet owners exhibit hyper-attachment,” said Victoria Stilwell, the British host of “It's Me or the Dog,” a show on the Animal Planet network. But that is not fair to the dog, she said, because it may suffer intense separation anxiety when it is left alone. Also, she pointed out, “If you allow your pets to become hyper-attached, you'd better understand that it will limit your human relationships.”

ADMITTING YOU HAVE A PROBLEM IS THE FIRST STEP

Her name is Elisabeth Montoya. She is a 30-year-old lawyer who lives in Bozeman, Mont., with her husband, Johnny, an architect, their 2 ½-year-old son, Jack, and their 88-pound golden retriever, Diego del Mar de la Joya Montoya.

Before her son was born, Ms. Montoya admits, she was “really annoying” with the dog. “We nearly expected him to be given a place setting at the table.” Even now, she remains a dogaholic.

“The first time we brought Diego to my mom's house was a disaster,” Ms. Montoya said. “He walked straight to the white-carpeted living room and proceeded to lift up his tail.”

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The dog dragged himself perhaps 6 to 8 feet. "He left a noticeable brown streak in his wake. Horrifying."

Now, Diego is even worse, Ms. Montoya said. He even bolted off the porch and bit a passer-by the other day.

"I babied him so much," she said. "That's why he's like this."

"We used to bring him to other people's houses," she said, "but now we don't bring him around. He's the cover dog for the worst dog ever."

BEING WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS IS A NICE GESTURE, BUT NOT NECESSARILY A SOLUTION

Ms. Montoya appears farther along the road to recovery than the couple who attended a catered dinner for out-of-town wedding guests with their puppy.

The setting was not far from Aspen, Colo., in a home so lovely it is frequently featured in shelter magazines. The name of the puppy — a truly out-of-control guest — was Dude.

"It was unbelievable that good friends of mine and good friends of the parents of the bride would even consider bringing this dog," said the hostess, a photographer and amateur landscape gardener named Sally who, perhaps because of the trauma, would not permit her last name to be used.

"The first thing Dude did was jump into the outdoor pond," Sally said. "He shakes off on the grass lawn, then promptly heads inside and leaps onto the white couches, leaving a trail of pond scum. Then he runs outside, jumps onto one of the dining chairs, jumps on the table and helps himself to the hors d'oeuvres and fillet."

A week later Sally received a note of apology, suggesting that she let bygones be bygones, signed with a paw print. Sally did not respond, which, she said, very much annoyed Dude's owner.

This happened five years ago, and they have not spoken since.

The owners declined to discuss the matter with a reporter, but sent a comment through the bride: "Dude categorically denies everything."

NEVER ASSUME

Problems can also occur when the guests assume that if the hosts have dogs, they, too, can bring theirs. This was the case with Donna Engelson, a 65-year-old former clothing designer, and her husband, Mel Engelson, a hardware manufacturer who for a time shared a Southampton home with Mr. Engelson's brother and business partner, Larry, along with his wife, Tina, and Tina's golden retriever, Cooper.

Although Donna Engelson had had asthma as a child, she did not worry about the dog. Her sister-in-law kept the house vacuumed and the dog upstairs.

One summer, the couples had a big Labor Day party. Since the Engelsons had a dog, friends brought theirs. After the third dog, Donna Engelson wound up in the emergency room. "It was very scary," Ms. Engelson said. "My breathing capacity was 65 percent of what it was." The couples are still close, but they have their own houses.

GIVE THAT PUPPY A TREAT

There was the time Rosi Kerr, today a 32-year-old New York energy consultant, then a teaching intern in an elite boarding school, brought her golden retriever puppy, Gus, to a meeting with the school's director, who happened to be a cat owner. Ms. Kerr wanted to extend her stay at the school, but had a feeling the director did not feel the same.

She certainly had not planned to bring her new puppy, but she was running late.

"I sat in the living room trying to keep an eye on my dog as he wandered and sniffed," Ms. Kerr said. "Somewhere along the line, I lost track of Gus. As she described how I was not a very good listener, I frantically craned my neck looking for my puppy."

Gus reappeared just as the director told Ms. Kerry she was being dismissed and dropped a large, kitty litter-encrusted deposit at the director's feet.

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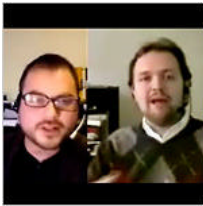
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