

Sharing their gift with pets, too

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By Taryn Plumb, Globe Correspondent | December 24, 2009

The photographer said “cheese!” - and Santa Sal Lizard held the 3-inch-long hissing cockroach, with its plated armor and inquisitive antennae, up to his cheek and let out a jolly chuckle.

Ah, poignant memories.

Santa portraits are a tradition, sometimes even a rite of passage: He appears with children and grandchildren in countless photo albums spanning generations.

But increasingly, these merry memories are including the furred, scaled, winged, gilled - and sometimes, creepy-crawly - members of the family.

Adored pets pose with the festive fellow in red in playfully titled “Santa Paws” or “Santa Claws” events at malls, pet stores and animal shelters across the country.

“It’s very popular,” said Laurie McCannon, development director of the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, which participates in such mirthful events each holiday season. “People do tend to make a big deal about their pets. It’s the same reason you would get your child’s photo with Santa: They’re family.”

Still, the photo shoots aren’t just mere indulgence - typically, they raise money for a worthy cause, such as animal rescue organizations or pet shelters, with local recipients including Animal Umbrella in Lynn and Cape Ann Animal Aid in Gloucester. Northeast Animal usually garners between \$500 and \$1,000 per event, McCannon said.

“You’d be surprised how many people show up,” she said.

When it comes to store events, pets are paraded in after hours for safety reasons, said Burlington Mall Santa Jim Heichelbech. Also, Santas have a dedicated suit that they use when snuggling up with animals for the camera - that’s to prevent allergic reactions to dander and pet hair among the regular rotation of human visitors, the veteran Santa impersonator explained.

The most common portrait subjects? Dogs, local Santas report.

And they come merry: jingly collars, hats, antlers, or snug in holiday sweaters. Others are bow-wow versions of Santa and Mrs. Claus, appearing bedecked in hats, boots, fur-lined coats and all.

After the pooches, there’s a steady procession of cats, guinea pigs, snakes, birds, turtles, iguanas and rabbits.

And then there are the more unusual subjects.

Some people show up with goldfish sloshing in their bowls; fuzz balls of baby llamas; even horses.

Lizard has posed with a furry-legged tarantula and a coiling Burmese python. He also cuddled with a Doberman pinscher, sans muzzle. (And the cockroach, by the way, was very well-behaved.)

But he’s not scared, or even a little creeped out, by some of these interactions?

Not that he’ll admit to. In fact, he’s up for an encounter with a scorpion or a monkey. Or whatever else crawls,

slithers, or creeps along to pose on his knee.

“A lot of people see their pets as children,” Lizard said, no matter how exotic.

“The last thing you want to do is tell a parent they have a scary child.” ■

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