

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, more clouds than sunshine, high 38. Tonight, mostly cloudy skies, low 32. Tomorrow, intervals of clouds and sunshine, a chilly day, high 41. Weather map, Page A30.

VOL. CLXIV . . . No. 56,713

© 2014 The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2014

\$2.50

C26

SPARE Times

Dec. 12-18

'Presents to the Animals'

A festively wrapped cardboard tube filled with mealworms is the kind of holiday gift that makes a lump of coal sound appealing. The same goes for a box of live crickets. But some New Yorkers would be happy to find these under the Christmas tree — or any tree.

They're the dwarf mongooses at the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn and the Andean bears at the Queens Zoo. In the "Presents to the Animals" program, every weekend through Dec. 28, these zoos' residents and their human visitors get seasonal entertainment.

"In caring for animals, we're trying to find ways to keep them both physically active and psychologically engaged," Craig Piper, the director of city zoos at the Wildlife Conservation Society, explained in a phone interview. Instead of just putting out food, zookeepers often hide it in the surrounding environment or offer it in a way that causes the creatures to work for it. While this practice, called en-



JULIE LARSEN MAHER/WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

richment, takes place year round, "at holiday time, we have a little fun with it, and wrap things up as presents," Mr. Piper said.

This Saturday and Sunday at the Prospect Park Zoo, North American river otters (one is above) will get their gifts at 11 a.m. — probably fish frozen in blocks of ice — followed by the

dwarf mongooses at 2:30 p.m. Other species will have their turns the following weekends. At the Queens Zoo, the same animals receive presents all month: pumas at 1 p.m.; mule-foot pigs at 2; and the Andean bears, which might have to climb trees for theirs, at 3.

In addition to edible gifts, animals appreciate scents, though

maybe not Chanel No. 5. "For our hogs, we'll wrap up wool that was clipped from a sheep, and they find it fun to root around for it," Mr. Piper said. He added that bears seem to enjoy the smells of cinnamon, nutmeg and pine as much as people do. "Catnip is something we'll give pumas," he said. (Yes, big cats like it, too.)

The zoos hope that the tradition will also stimulate people to give, Mr. Piper said. All month, the city's wildlife parks are collecting new, unwrapped toys for local families; each donor will receive a free admission ticket to one of the parks. Because even though the animals get presents every year, some children don't.

(At the Prospect Park Zoo, 450 Flatbush Avenue, 718-399-7339, prospectparkzoo.com, and the Queens Zoo, 53-51 111th Street, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, 718-271-1500, queenszoo.com. Free with admission: \$8; \$6 for 65+; \$5 for ages 3 through 12; free for under 3.)

LAUREL GRAEBER

For Children

'A SUPERBUNNY CHRISTMAS' (Saturday and Sunday) Imagine "101 Dalmatians," but with rabbits. In this new musical, based on a book series by Amber L. Spradlin, the title character, himself a pet, rescues 101 members of his species from a villain and finds them all a home for the holidays. This busy bunny and his friends (including a reindeer) are brought to the stage by the appropriately named Rabbit Hole Theatrics, whose production has a book and lyrics by Michael MacKenzie Wills and music by Alastair William King. At 2 p.m., the Actors Fund Arts Center, 160 Schermerhorn Street, between Smith and Hoyt Street, Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, 917-563-9830, rabbitholetheatrics.org; free.

WINTER FEST (Saturday) Baseball season may be over, but there's still fun to be had at Citi Field. This first Winter Fest will bring Santa Claus and team mascots to the turf, along with cookie decorating, caroling, craft projects and face painting. There will even be baseballs: a variety of balls decorated and autographed by sports and cultural figures will be on display, to be auctioned off to benefit Toys for Tots. From 1 to 5 p.m., Roosevelt Avenue and 126th Street, Flushing, Queens, 718-507-3663, mets.com/winterfest; \$10; \$7 for children.

LAUREL GRAEBER