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Lisa Melnik, wild animal keeper, gets "Zheng," a Red Panda, to stand and be weighed at the Akron Zoo, November 2, 2012 in Akron, Ohio.

## Training Is Key For Wild Animals, Just Like The Family Dog

BY KATHY ANTONIOTTI  
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AKRON, Ohio — Boo's world turned upside down when Athena moved in last spring to share the large barn owl enclosure at the Akron Zoo. After getting a new roommate, the raptor, who had seemed happy splitting her digs with the male owl that died of old age, inexplicably became aggressive when zoo staff entered her habitat, said owl trainer Shannon Benedict of Stow, Ohio.

"Whenever anyone goes in the cage, she starts shrieking and screaming so loudly you can hear her all over the zoo," she explained. She asked nationally recognized animal behaviorist Dr. Grey Stafford for help to curb the owl's obvious stress.

Stafford, author of the book "Zoomility: Keeper Tales of Training with Positive Reinforcement," visited the zoo recently to conduct a behavior training seminar for the public and help staff members find solutions for stubborn behavior issues.

"It's an opportunity for our staff members to talk to someone who's been at it for 22 years," said mammal curator Eric Albers.

When the group arrived at the barn owl habitat, they saw Boo quietly resting in a nest box while her nemesis, Athena, had claimed Boo's favorite perch. Benedict acknowledged she hit a roadblock while trying to help the bird learn to cope with the newcomer.

"Are there any fights between the two?" Stafford asked.

Boo never confronts Athena, "just me," Benedict said.

"Well, she's taking it out on you," Stafford told her.

Stafford suggested Benedict try feeding the bird frequently during the day so she would associate the food Benedict was giving her with positive feelings.

Eventually, the nocturnal hunter's daytime world would begin to revolve around seeing Benedict, who represents food, and she would obsess less about her perceived territorial rights being violated, he said.

"When you leave, they should know the food leaves, too," he said.

Stafford began his zoological career as a trainer at Sea World in Aurora, Ohio. He said his methods work with all animals, including domestic cats.

"They are just like the big cats here — the lions and jaguars —

when it comes to training."

They are still felines, Albers reminded a visitor. "These guys are not all that different, but they can take your face off," he said.

It takes a lot of training to get a snow leopard to back up to the bars on its cage to await the piercing pain of an inoculation by needle, but that's the goal, said Stafford.

"We're teaching animals to participate in their own care," he said.

Animal keepers today want to avoid anesthetics for routine exams and inoculations. An anesthetic, as well as the stress of having it administered, may skew blood test results, Stafford said.

Tara Gifford, the zoo's animal training consultant who works with zoo staff members one day a week, concurred with Stafford.

"Any time you can get a good look at an animal without anesthesia is good for the animal's welfare," she said while observing Zheng, a red panda, standing on a scale for the price of a raisin.

Lisa Melnik, primary trainer for the red pandas, demonstrated how she encourages 4-year-old Zheng when she enters his habitat for daily training sessions.

"As always, we remember they are wild animals. We know the subtle signs of frustration and know when to back off," she said.

Stafford's message of positive reinforcement training with Zoomility's three R's — request, response, reinforce — has earned praise from TV personality Jack Hanna, director emeritus of the Columbus Zoo, who wrote the foreword in Stafford's book.

"His work in zoos, oceanariums, and television has enabled him to apply the same principles of reinforcement training to dozens of exotic and endangered species. Along the way, he's helped many pet owners and professionals provide better care for their animals through positive reinforcement," Hanna wrote.

While food may be the incentive for many animals, it doesn't always work; some animals may require other inducements, said Stafford.

"Reinforcement can be done with toys, attention from the teacher, or a particular scent," he said.

That's why visitors to the zoo's website shouldn't be surprised that the donation "wish list" includes perfumes for its scent-loving residents.

# Find The Perfect Tree This Christmas

BY DR. JOHN BALL  
South Dakota State University

Christmas tree lots are already beginning to spring up around the state and Thanksgiving marks the start of the Christmas tree season with about 36 million trees being sold between Thanksgiving and Christmas. While artificial trees enjoyed increased sales for the past decade, those sales have stagnated and now there is a return to having the traditional tree. A traditional Christmas tree is also the environmental friendly way to celebrate the holidays. The average artificial Christmas tree has a life span of 6 years before it ends up in a landfill. The traditional Christmas tree, while used only one season, can become valuable mulch, a winter bird feeder or even used as a fish habitat after the holidays.

Here are some tips on picking out the perfect tree. The way to obtain the freshest tree is to harvest it yourself at a choose-and-cut Christmas tree farm.

This way you are guaranteed a "fresh" tree rather than one that may have been harvested several weeks earlier. If cutting your own tree is not possible, here are some ways to check for freshness at a Christmas tree sales lot. First, give the tree a light but vigorous shake. Only a few interior needles should fall out of the tree if it is fresh. If a pile of brown needles appears on the ground below the tree, particularly from the branch tips, it is not a fresh tree. Next, reach into a branch and pull the needles gently through your hand as you move out towards the tip. The needles should bend, not break, as your fingers run across them and the branch should only slightly bend.

Regardless of whether you buy a tree from a lot or cut it yourself, once you get the tree home, leave it outside while you set the stand up. The choice of a stand is probably the most critical factor in maintaining the freshness of the tree once in the home. The stand should be able to hold one-half to one-gallon of water as the new Christmas tree may absorb up to this amount in the first day. A good rule-of-thumb is a tree will use 1 quart of water per day for every inch trunk diameter at the base. If you have a tree with a 3-inch base, it may use 3 quarts of water per day.

Just before you bring the tree in the house cut the base about one-inch from the bottom. This will open the sap-filled tracheids — the pores responsible for transporting water — and allows water to be absorbed into the tree. The base cut does not have to be slanted; the angle makes little difference in the amount of water absorbed. Once the tree is in the stand add water and then never let the stand become empty. If the stand becomes empty for more than 6 hours, the tree's pores plug up. Water uptake will then be significantly reduced, the tree will dry out and the needles will soon begin to fall. If the tree stand does dry up for half a day or more there is nothing that can be



done other than pull the tree out of the stand and recut the base — not a pleasant task once the lights and ornaments are already up. Nothing needs to be added to the water in the stand to improve needle retention. The commercial "tree fresher" products do not significantly increase the life of the tree and the home remedies such as aspirin, sugar, soft drinks and vodka do not work and may be harmful to pets that may drink from the stand.

Place the stand in a spot that receives only indirect light from the windows and not near any heat duct. This will reduce water loss from the tree and prolong its freshness. Another tip to prolonging freshness is to start out with a clean stand. Before setting up the tree wash the stand out with a solution of about a cupful of bleach to a cup of water, to reduce the growth of microorganisms that may also plug up the tree's pores.

Which is the best tree? Each species has its good points but the Fraser fir is probably one of the favorites. The tree is very fragrant, has

excellent needle retention and the branches are stiff enough to hold ornaments. Balsam fir, pictured to the left, is another good choice though the needles do not last as long and the branches are not quite as stiff. Canaan fir, another popular fir appears to have qualities similar to Fraser fir and is also becoming a popular Christmas tree.

Pines are very popular with Scotch pine, pictured to the left, probably the most popular tree in the country. It also is very fragrant, has excellent needle retention and the branches are stiff. White pine is another pine commonly sold at Christmas tree stands and has a fair fragrance, but the needle retention is not quite as good as Scotch pine and the branches are very flexible meaning heavy ornaments may fall off. White pines do have very soft needles and if you are going to run into the tree in the middle of the night this is the one!

Spruces are not as popular of Christmas trees primarily due to their poor needle retention. If you want to have a blue spruce as your Christmas tree, you probably should wait until a couple of weeks before Christmas as the needles may only last that long.

Once the needles begin to fall, blue spruce are about the worst tree to have as the fallen needles are sharp and seem to find their way into socks and slippers. Blue spruce, pictured to the left, has the best needle retention of the spruces but does not have much of a fragrance. The branches are very stiff, however, and can support the heaviest ornaments. White spruce, or Black Hills spruce is not commonly available though is used in the Black Hills. It does make a nice tree, particularly when cut fresh but it does not have much of a fragrance and occasionally Black Hills spruce trees can have a slight musky odor.

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