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12 Days of Christmas in Anchorage: A consumer's guide

DECEMBER 20, 2012 - 5:17 PM

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ALONG WITH CRANBERRY SAUCE and Black Friday sales, the holidays just wouldn't be complete without people bemoaning the materialism that has overtaken the season. Christmas should not be about stuff, they cry—it's supposed to be about peace on Earth and good will to men, not iPad minis and new video games.

Every year, it seems, the consumerism running amok over the holidays gets worse. And it is here that the "Twelve Days of Christmas" is a comfort. Nestled in the midst of Holy Nights and angels hearing things on high is a little gem of 18th century materialism. "Let me tell you," the singer iterates over and over again, "what I got this year" (and it's not a donation in their name to a charitable organization of their choice). It turns out people have been small-minded about presents for as long as there have been Christmas carols.

We don't see a day coming anytime soon where gifts—the giving and the getting—aren't a part of the Christmas equation, so we decided to do the math.

Our conclusion? Money can't buy you love, but according to our research, \$7,702.46 will buy you the 12 days of Christmas in Anchorage

A partridge in a pear tree

Pear trees are not for the casual Alaskan gardener. "I have one small pear tree in Wasilla," Mark Weaver, vice president of Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers Association told us. Weaver took our call on his cell phone from a farm in Central California, where he is going to winter-over while his Wasilla trees sleep.

There was a scratchy, screeching noise in the connection, and when we inquired about it, Weaver offered to walk around the barnyard a bit. The noise persisted. Turns out he was being followed by a flock of four barnyard

turkeys. "They seem to really like me," he said. As for the pear tree, Weaver said he recommends them only for the most diligent and enthusiastic gardeners. Getting a pear tree to produce fruit in Alaska, Weaver said, "Is going to cost about 10 years and a lot of prayers."

There are potential substitutions, notably the dwarf lemon and lime trees at Mile 5.2 Greenhouse in Eagle River. The nursery also offers kumquat trees that are bearing fruit right now. The Meyer's lemon tree might be the most popular indoor fruit tree in Alaska, it's a dwarf tree, but the lemons are full-sized. Five-year-old trees are on sale this winter for \$125 and come with instructions for providing extra light in the winter.

Our true love is a bit quirky so we'll hang a CD of A Partridge Family Christmas Card (\$5 online) to the lemon tree and—because truest is also a serious pop music collector—a vinyl copy of the Partridge Family's 1972

album Shopping Bag which boasts "FREE SHOPPING BAG INSIDE!" on the front cover and opens with the swoon-worthy single, "Girl, You Make My Day." Several copies of Shopping Bag were listed as "new" or "like new" from various sellers on Amazon.com, but we chose to splurge and spend \$76.68 for a copy that has remained factory sealed all these years.

Partridge Family on CD and vinyl—\$81.68

Meyer's lemon tree—\$125

Total—\$206.68

Mile 5.2 Greenhouse at mile 5.2 old Glenn Highway in Eagle River, 694-3978 and mile52.com

Two turtle doves

There are several varieties of turtle doves, some of which are popular caged birds, others are known for challenging hunters with capricious flight patterns. We found guided hunts in Kansas and Florida, but both states had closed their dove hunting seasons before we could book an airplane ticket. So we went looking for farm-raised game birds at local meat counters. Arlitia Jones, at C & J Tender Meat Company, tells us that quail and farm-raised squab are "the closest you're gonna find to doves in Anchorage," and gave us the current market prices: \$12.98 for quail and \$12.10 for squab.

We're going with the squab, which is a young tender pigeon. *The Wise Encyclopedia of Cooking* reports squab are never more than four weeks old, which is what ensures their tenderness. Fannie Merritt Farmer's classic tome *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* calls the bird "a delicious tidbit for the convalescent," preferred by doctors as the first meat

a patient is allowed after fasting. Squab vary in size, so we went with four pounds and figure on having guests for dinner at some point during the holidays. Our true love is a barbeque lover—even during winter—so we're going to substitute squab into a recipe for smoked turtle dove shish kebabs from Bigoven.com. Of course, many people lean toward soups and stews this time of year. If that sounds like your true love's preference for a cozy winter meal, surf around for a recipe for squab stew.

Two squab (to serve six)—\$48.40

C & J Tender Meat Co., 324 E. International Airport Road, 562-2838

Three French hens

We're told that three varieties of French-bred chickens—Crevecoeur, Houdan and La Fleche—would have been available as gifts during the 1700, when 12 Days of Christmas became a popular carol in England. We found none of these available commercially in the Anchorage area. Houdans are available online but the websites we visited did not want to ship just three at a time. One Iowa hatchery has Houdans for \$2.81 each and requires a minimum order of 25 birds. So three French hens would cost \$70.25 and we'd have the added trouble of a 22-bird surplus to dispose of in mid-winter.

Our true love is a deserving soul, but we didn't plan on getting blood on our hands. So we contacted an urban garden guru known to raise birds and asked for advice. She pointed us toward Craigslist (and was polite enough not to include the word "du-uh" as she did so) where we found active local trade in farm animals. (Holiday lambs, on-the-hoof, were going for \$250 and up.) A man named Carl, in Wasilla, offered laying hens for \$10 each.

Alas, if our true love is to have laying hens, a hen house will be necessary. Alaska Mill and Feed offers the Cape Cod Chicken Coop for \$349. Don't be shocked. The carpentry is impressive enough to make the Cape Cod the mother-hen-of-all chicken coops. The hen house is lifted off the ground so birds can walk underneath, which will maximize the barnyard space on our true love's tiny city lot. There's a ramp to the hen house, nesting boxes inside and two doors so the birds and their eggs are always within reach. The best feature would be the slide-out cleaning trays that make the icky job of cleaning out the cockle-doodle-doo-doo a little more tolerable. The farm and garden gurus at Alaska Mill and Feed also recommend a heated water supply for winter bird care.

The (not-so) French hens—\$30 (Carl via Craigslist)

Cape Cod Chicken Coop—\$349.99

Electric water heater—\$49.99

Straw—\$14.95

Total—\$444.93

Alaska Mill and Feed, 1501 East First Avenue, 276-6016 and www.alaskamillandfeed.com
(<http://www.alaskamillandfeed.com>)

Four colly birds

The colly birds have long been, in our estimation, the most confounding lyric in the 12 Days song. We're not alone in our confusion. Our own true love, like many modern carolers, prefers to sing "four calling birds" because it's easier to understand.

And truest is no dummy. This year the volunteer editors at Wikipedia set us all straight, with a thoroughly researched entry on the carol and its lyrics that cleared up some of the confusion. We've learned that "collie birds" or "colly birds" were the favored lyric in the 19th century. Colly meant "coal black" and it was a common name for the blackbird, which British carolers of the time would have understood.

The blackbird might be hard to find in Southcentral Alaska, but the raven, another coal-black bird, is practically everywhere. Trouble is, catching a raven would be difficult and illegal. Still, this substitution seems worth the effort as it would lend a strong sense of place to our gift giving. What could be more Alaskan than a raven?

Turns out the Bird Treatment and Learning Center can help. The Anchorage-based nonprofit is known for rescuing injured birds, nursing them to health and, when possible, releasing them to the wild. Bird TLC has an education program that uses otherwise healthy birds that can't be expected to survive on their own and won't be released. They'll bring a raven to your schoolroom, church event or office party, if you fill out an application and make a donation.

Heather Merewood, executive director of Bird TLC, says right now the center has four corvids (ravens are a corvid) in the program, including a raven named Crawford and two northwestern crows, Corbie and Kodiak. Willow the magpie is also available, and even though she's not all black she is a corvid. Bird TLC also has eagles for hire (at a slightly higher rate) and Merewood said owls have been popular in recent years. "The birds in the education program have injured wings or an eye injury—an injury that would prevent them from surviving on their own in the wild," Merewood said. The birds are not taken into private homes. They also can't be hired-out for commercial purposes, Merewood said, but other than that they are available by appointment.

The captive birds have trained handlers and a presentation costs \$75 per hour, per bird, with each additional bird billed at \$40 per hour. (Eagles are \$120 per hour, with \$60 dollar per hour for the second eagle.)

Four colly birds—\$195 (an application is required)

Bird Treatment and Learning Center, 6132 Nielson Way, 562-4852 and www.birdtlc.net (<http://www.birdtlc.net>)

Five gold rings

Sure, you could give your true love five gold bands for their fingers. Boring! Not to mention bulky. How about body piercing, instead? The Piercing Pagoda in the Fifth Avenue Mall has nose, belly and eyebrow rings in 10-karat and 14-karat gold. The best-selling belly ring is the double flower model, a 10-karat hoop with cubic zirconia accent stones priced at \$99.99. The top seller in the eyebrow section is a ring that matches the bestseller belly ring, a 10-karat gold ring with cubic zirconia accents for \$39.99. But your true love has two eyebrows right? So for symmetry's sake, that's \$79.98 for the brows. It seems that gold with cubic zirconia accents is the most popular combination for every kind of piercing—the nose rings come in at \$34.99, but again, to keep things even it's best to buy one for each side of the nose. So, to tally: one belly button, two eyebrows and both nostrils brings us up to five gold rings at \$249.95. Not bad for a face full of gold rings (plus navel).

Five gold belly button, eyebrow and nose rings—\$249.95

ADVERTISEMENT



Piercing Pagoda, at the Fifth Avenue Mall, 320 W. Fifth Ave. 272-6003 or online at www.pagoda.com (<http://www.pagoda.com>)

Six geese a-laying

The cheapest route to acquire six geese a-laying would be to wait until spring, find a shrubbery at the edge of any south Anchorage business and a-lay in wait. We've witnessed shoppers fending off hordes of belligerent Canadian geese in parking lots near the Dimond Center each spring for years. They're not known for their gentle nature or quickness to respond to a honking horn. They flock to the parts of town that feature both marshy tracts of land and plenty of shoppers to drop French fries and other goodies. For the cost of a small fry from the McDonald's dollar menu and a

little bit of patience, you could easily snag yourself six geese in no time. Stealing wild geese from parking lots is probably illegal though, so if you're looking to go the much more patient route, we found a goose and gander on Craigslist for a mere \$50. A little mood music, some dim lighting and a well-feathered nest and you could have six geese a-laying by this time in 2015.

Geese – \$50, a lot of time, and goose feed.

Keep an eye on the for sale/wanted>farm & garden section on Craigslist.org

Seven swans a-swimming

There are different species of swans. Some are large, white and plentiful like the White Mute Swan, which is also one of the largest flying birds in the world. The White Mute Swan is probably the most recognizable swan, with lots of fluffy white feathers and bright orange and black bill. They're also jerks, apparently, and the Internet does not suggest keeping them as pets or expecting anything less than ruthless and aggressive behavior from them. That said, if you did want to buy seven of them to set a-swimming, it is possible to buy this variety online. According to [purelypoultry.com](http://www.purelypoultry.com), juvenile swans start at \$422.50, yearlings are \$780 and breeding birds are \$975. Taking the least expensive option here to get seven of them would cost \$2,957.50, plus \$400 per pair for shipping, which is another \$1,400. But hey, they have a live arrival guarantee.

Swans—\$4,357.50 just to get them here, plus it sounds like they might need anger management therapy to make them tolerable.

Swans for mail order available through www.purelypoultry.com (<http://www.purelypoultry.com>) or by calling 800-216-9917

Eight maids a-milking

The industrialization of commercial milk products means that maids haven't laid hands on the udder of your average American dairy cow in a long time. Alaska's own local dairy farm, Matanuska Creamery, employs mechanical milking like just about everyone else.

But cows aren't the only animal that can be milked. Jennifer Ansley has 11 goats on her farm near Fairbanks. Her business, Far Above Rubies, sells soaps and lotions made from goats' milk.

Ansley's goats get milked by hand twice a day, a chore she said takes about an hour in the evening and an hour at night. Ansley hasn't been in the market for a milking maid yet (her 11-year-old son helps milk the goats, but she doesn't pay him), however, she said she pays \$50 an hour for people to fill in on the farm when her family's away.

While it's true that a mere girl (or boy) can do it, milking a goat is no simple task, Ansley said. Goats are smart and tend to be mischievous, especially if they sense you're a newbie, she said. If you're not watchful and competent, they'll kick over the milk bucket to mess with you.

"When my husband goes down to milk for me he says it's like being in a classroom of eight graders with a substitute teacher," she said.

Eight maids (or other expert) milkers—\$400 for one hour at the udder

For more information on Ansley's goat farm—or goat milk products—see alaskagoatmilk.com

Nine ladies dancing

We're taking the classy route here because there are many different kinds of ladies who dance. We reached out to local modern dance group Pulse Dance Company to get a quote on what it would cost to commission a performance with nine dancers. Stephanie Wonchala, the company's founder and artistic director, broke down the cost of a single three- to five-minute performance for us. Studio time to rehearse a single dance number, taking about 30 hours for the short finished work, is \$35 an hour. That's just the start. Then there's costuming, dancer stipends, putting something back into Pulse's account at the end of it all to help fund the next performance and cover administrative costs, etc. The real cost of nine ladies dancing would total about \$2,250. Wonchala doubts that the average Anchorage citizen would be able to book her troupe at that price though. She's more likely to charge a mere \$500 for such a performance.

\$2,250 at actual cost or \$500

To book them privately visit www.pulsedancecompany.com (<http://www.pulsedancecompany.com>) or email pulsedancecompany@gmail.com (<mailto:pulsedancecompany@gmail.com>), or see them live at the APU Grant Hall, January 25-27, 2013.

Ten lords a-leaping

We adore democracy. However, a downside of our liberation from the monarchy is that it's not so easy to find a bunch of lords hanging around, waiting for you to hire them to leap around for your beloved (back in England we're sure it's a snap). But while we weren't able to find any true-blue, locally sourced lords, the Last Frontier Drag Kings are likely to put on a better show anyways. For \$500, this troupe of male impersonators will lip-sync and dance to just about every kind of music for a two- to three-hour performance. "I have a king that will do country, I have a king who does R&B, I have a king to do rock and pop... I have different flavors," said Ali Hernandez, the group's owner, founder, manager and DJ.

If kings Noah, Silk, Danny and assorted guests artists can swagger through all that, they are certainly capable of inserting a leap here and there. In each performance, the Kings traditionally host an auction as well, to drum up funds for local non-profits like AWAIC, so your true love can both get and give back as well.

A two-hour performance of Last Frontier Drag Kings—\$500 (plus tips)

You can find the Last Frontier Drag Kings on Facebook, or catch their first anniversary celebration at S Lounge this Saturday, Dec. 22.

Eleven pipers piping

"Love," observed Pat Benatar, "is a battlefield." And while soft-strumming guitars and swoony violins are a more typical choice for romance, our true love is anything but typical. Sometimes, the capriciousness of affection requires a more strident call to arms. For that, we turn to Crow Creek Pipes and Drums. Crow Creek has been kilting it up in Anchorage for 35 years, and performs at over 60 events annually. Those are mostly large gatherings such as graduations, weddings, funerals, parades and the like, said President Bill Watson. But there would certainly be 11 pipers competent to serenade a sweetheart as well, and such a performance would run you about \$500.

While getting the bag pipers shouldn't be a problem, Watson cautions that the full 20-30 minute performance might not be what you'd call mood music. "I got to tell you the instrument is not exactly like a flute, it's a little more loud and obnoxious type of sound," Watson said.

He told us that the instrument has its roots in conflict and war, and Scottish men going into battle would use its bracing sound to "get the blood going."

Sounds perfect.

Eleven bag pipers, fully outfitted with kilts, sashes and all—\$500

Crow Creek Pipes and Drums can be reached at www.crowcreekpipes.com (<http://www.crowcreekpipes.com>) and 980-1158

Twelve drummers drumming

Our true love has a keen appreciation for cultural diversity, from French hens to Scottish pipers, and we can't think of a better way to round out our gift-giving marathon than with 12 taiko drummers.

The fact that it's easy to find and commission 12 taiko drummers in this town is mostly due to the efforts of one woman, Erika Ninoyu, who is the director and founder of the East Taiko Team and the Wadaiko Alaska community taiko group.

Taiko drumming is often associated with muscular shirtless men beating instruments the size of tractor tires. While taiko does incorporate elements of martial arts, Ninoyu said it has a romantic side as well. The Hachijo style of drumming is "fluid and almost like a dance, it has restrained athleticism and is very beautiful," Ninoyu said.

Ninoyu said that the cost of hiring 12 drummers would depend on whether she was composing an original piece, how long they'd be playing, and how theatrical the performance would be. But she ballparked at about \$250.

Twelve taiko drummers—\$250

For upcoming taiko performances or to reach Erika Ninoyu, see www.thunderbands.org (<http://www.thunderbands.org>)

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