

## Using South American Camelids as Pack Animals

Our topics for this week are::

- **Advantages of packing with llamas**
- **Limitations on packing with alpacas and llamas**
- **Equipment for packing with llamas**

Llamas can be excellent pack animals. Alpacas are not large and strong enough to be effective as a pack animal for anything other than the equivalent of a child's backpack and less than 25 lb.

Llamas do not have hooves. They have two padded toes on each foot. This enables them to be sure-footed and cause less damage to trails than that caused by horses or mules. Llamas are browsers, like goats, which in many environments allows them to eat as they go. Their height and width is about the same as humans. Therefore, they can follow human leaders in lower and tighter passages better than other pack animals. They are also easy to transport because they kush, lie in sternal recumbency, during travel. As a result, they can be transported in horse trailers, pickup truck beds with livestock sides, and vans.

Llamas should be trained for packing beginning at a year of age and led behind experienced older llamas while packing. Blankets or other soft, light weight objects should be carried during initial training. Less than 30 lb. should be carried until llamas are at least 3 years old. Adult conditioned llamas can carry up to 25-30% of their weigh, that is, they can carry 75 to 135 lb. All pack llamas should be gradually conditioned prior to a long pack trip.

Adult, conditioned pack llamas carry their load on rigid or soft pack saddles made for llamas. A saddle pad or blanket is used under a rigid saddle. Rigid saddles are made of wood, aluminum, or fiberglass and held in place by two cinches. Rigid saddles are tent-shaped (crossbuck design) to allow the weight to be carried evenly on both sides of the upper chest without pressure on the top of the spine. Panniers are the detachable packs that are attached to saddles to carry the load. Soft pack saddles also distribute the load weight on both sides of the upper chest.

Pack saddles are placed on llamas in a similar manner to how riding saddles are put on horses. The llama should be brushed first. The saddle pad and saddle are placed just behind the shoulder blades and the front cinch is applied first and then the back cinch. Tightening the cinches should be gradual, done at three separate times. After the last tightening, the handler should still be able to get 3 fingers underneath both cinches.

If packing is intended in areas with steep slopes, a breast collar (strap that goes from each side of the saddle and around the front of the chest) to keep the load from shifting backward and a crupper (strap that goes from the saddle and under the tail) to keep the load from shifting forward will be needed. Neither should be so tight that fingers cannot be slipped underneath the breast collar and crupper.

Each side of the pannier should be weighed to ensure an evenly distributed load. There should not be more than 2 lb. difference in weight between the two sides. The heaviest part of the pack should be closest to the llama's body to prevent the load from being top-heavy and shifting.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Adult alpacas can pack up to 25 lb while llamas can pack over 4 times more.**
- 2. Llamas are more sure footed and less damaging to trail environments than horses or mules.**
- 3. Llamas are easily transported to and from trail heads.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.