

## Handling Alpacas and Llamas

Our topics for this week are::

- **Manual Restraint**
- **Catch Pens, Stocks, and Halters and Lead Ropes**
- **Handling Cria**

Many aspects of handling horses can be applied to camelids, such as avoiding feeding treats by hand to discourage crowding and invasion of a handler's personal space, allowing crias to learn by watching well-behaved adult camelids being handled, learning to be led with a halter and lead rope by gentle pressure and well-timed release, and learning patience and respect by being tied by a halter and lead rope for increasing periods of time.

Camelids generally have an aloof, nonaggressive attitude and are easy to handle. Males are more likely to bite, strike with their heads and necks, and bump with their shoulders. Alpacas tend to kick in defense. Camelids, especially female alpacas, will spit a fine mist of regurgitated rumen contents, if made angry. They usually warn a potential spit victim with gurgling sounds first. They spit at each other more often than on gentle handlers. A hand towel can be stuffed under the nose piece of a halter to protect against spit if handling a gurgling camelid.

Even docile, well-handled camelids are often resentful of being caught. They can be difficult to impossible to catch in a large pasture. To catch them, they can be herded into a small catch pen or funneled into an alleyway. Herding may be more effective by sweeping done by two handlers holding a 30-ft rope about 3 ft off the ground and moving camelids toward a fence. One handler can tie his end to the fence while the other maintains the trapped camelids. The free handler can then catch and halter the desired camelid.

Typically, camelids must be trained to enter small catch pens that are 10 X 30 ft, or smaller and at least 5 ft high, where they are often fed to desensitize them to the enclosure. They should be approached in a calm direct manner in the pen using an approach and retreat method similar to catching an evasive horse. Rushing an approach can cause camelids to panic and injure themselves. Camelids that are frightened should be caught in a shelter or building with one or more calm companions to prevent attempted jumping over a fence.

The basic manual restraint of a camelid is for the handler to wrap an arm around the camelid's neck near its head and pull it close to the handler's body. The handler's other hand pushes down on its shoulders or holds the camelid's shoulder and chest close to his body. An alternative hold to holding its shoulder is to grasp the base of the tail. However, grasping their tail may cause some to kush. Pinning them against a solid wall may also assist with restraint. The ears should never be used for restraint. Causing pain or fear from handling their ears will teach them to dangerously swing their head and neck in efforts to escape.

Dogs should not be allowed within sight nor sound of camelid catch pens.

## **Basic Equipment and Facilities**

### **Stocks**

A restraint chute similar to a horse stock is advisable for ease of restraint of llamas. Alpacas respond better to loose restraint with a halter and lead rope. Camelid stocks are tall and narrow. If they are not constructed of anchored posts, stocks should be bolted to the floor to prevent it from being tipped over on its side. The size should be 2 ft wide, 5.5 feet long, and 45 inches to the top rail. There should be access to the camelid from all sides. A front and rear cinch attached to side rails is required to keep camelids from kushing in the stocks. Cinches should be 8 to 10 inches apart for llamas and closer for alpacas. A third cinch may be needed for some camelids to go over the withers to prevent rearing or jumping. Crosstie rings should be in forward positions to prevent the tied camelid from moving backward in the stocks. Quick release ties should be used if lower cinches are not used to prevent kushing.

### **Moving and Separating**

Camelids are extremely herd-oriented and are best moved as groups. Separation of individuals from the herd is done best by using a series of catch pens that gradually get smaller until an individual can be caught. Another method of separation involves two handlers holding a 30 to 40 ft rope about 3 feet off the ground to sort camelids. Blindfolds should not be used in an attempt to move camelids because they will kush.

### **Halters and Lead Ropes**

Camelids can be taught to be haltered and led. This is basic training for llamas to be used as pack animals. They are principally handled from the left side and led from their left side. Camelid halters should be used to prevent pinching off their nostrils. Placing the halter is done with a bear hug approach as with haltering horses. Pony halters should not be used because the noseband is too low for camelids. The noseband should be at least 1½ inches above the end of the bony part of the nose. At least 2 fingers should be able to be placed under the lower aspect of the band and the jaw so that it can chew. The cheekpieces should be at least 1 inch below the eyes. Halters should be removed when not handling the animal because of the risk of it catching on brush, fences, and other objects.

### **Handling Cria**

Cria are handled similarly to foals by boxing in their movements with the handler's arms without squeezing them. Small crias can be flanked and laid in lateral recumbency or pressed against a solid wall as with sheep or goats.

If they kush in resistance, a handler can bend down on their knees and straddle their chest and hold the upper area of its neck. They can be kept in kush position by chukkering, using a folded loop of rope over the back in front of the pelvis with the ends of the loop around the fetlocks of the flexed hindlegs. This prevents them from being able to rise. In this position, another handler can perform jugular venipuncture or administer oral medications.

Cria should be handled for brief periods (less than 20 minutes) on a regular basis to gradually desensitize them to being haltered and led, loosely restrained, and have their legs and feet handled. This will prepare them for necessary toenail trimmings 3 to 4 times per year if their enclosures are not abrasive enough to wear the nails down.

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. When handling camelids be mindful of the possibility of a camelid swinging its head, biting, kicking, bumping with its shoulder, or spitting.**
- 2. Dogs should not be present when camelids are herded or handled.**
- 3. Never try to restrain camelids by their tails or ears.**

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.