

## Domestication and Behavior of South American Camelids and Catching Camelids

Our topics for this week are:

- The domestication of South American camelids
- Natural behavior of camelids
- Catching and manually restraining a camelid

Llamas and alpacas are domesticated camelids indigenous to the Americas that are related to Asian camels. They were domesticated and selectively bred for 4,000 to 5,000 years by the Incas in the Andean highlands. The llama is a beast of burden that can carry 25-30% of its weight when conditioned. It is also bred for their meat, hide, and sinew. The smaller alpaca is bred for its fine wool.

Although camelids are ruminants, they have significant differences when compared with sheep and goats. Camelids have long necks that they tend to put through holes in fences, among other places and get caught or injured. Camelids have a pacing gait like that of Standardbred horses. The front and rear legs on the same side move forward and backward at the same time.

Camelids have poor tolerance to heat, and an aversion to dogs. **Kushing** is laying down on their sternum. It can be a means of adjusting to overheating by cooling their abdomen on cool ground, but it also is a passive means of defense. Their overt defense tactics include kicking (they usually do not strike), spitting, and sometimes biting. Spitting is a spraying of rumen contents that is preceded by a gurgling sound. The spray may be effective for 6 ft. It is usually a prelude to an attempted escape or an impending attack. Pinning the ears back is another clue to possible aggression. They are adapted to cold but not frigid temperatures (less than 10°F).

There is one breed of llama and two breeds of alpaca, Huacaya and Suri. Suri alpacas are less common. Their longer hair that curls like dreadlocks and parts on the middle of the back is distinctive.

Males and some female camelids have vestigial incisors, canine teeth, and large premolars which become 6 **fighting teeth** that begin to erupt at 2 years of age and are completely erupted by 4 years of age. There are 2 pairs on the upper arcade, just behind the dental pad, and 1 pair below on the mandible. Fighting teeth are sharp and angled backward. Breeding males should have the fighting teeth sawed off with obstetrical wire for the safety of other camelids and handlers.

South American camelids do not have hooves. They have 2 toes with large nails and a large soft footpad. Their sternal area is heavily callused for long periods of rest in sternal position.

Adult breeding males are called **machos**. Castrated males are **geldings**. Adult females are **hembras**, and the young are **cria**.

### Approaching and Catching

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, 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 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.

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

- 1. Kushing is a camelid laying down on its sternum, a form of passive resistance by camelids.**
- 2. Machos, breeding males, should have their fighting teeth sawed off for the safety of other camelids and humans.**
- 3. Basic manual restraint of South American camelids is hugging their neck with one arm and pushing down on their shoulders with the other hand, or holding the shoulders against the handler's body.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

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.