

Understanding Camelids: Alpacas and Llamas

Our topics for this week are::

- **The uses of camelids**
- **Differentiation of alpacas compared to llamas**
- **Camelid behavior**

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.

Llamas and alpacas appear similar. However, adult llamas are larger, taller, and stronger than alpacas. Llamas have banana-shaped ears while alpaca ears are more like a teddy bear's. Alpacas are about 1 to 2 ft shorter at the shoulder than llamas. Alpacas also have lower set, stubbier tails and a more sloping rump. 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.

The herd social structure of llamas and alpacas are more similar to sheep than goats. Unlike sheep, males are very protective of their territory, especially male llamas. This instinct prevents overpopulation in areas with sparse vegetation and assures genetic diversity in the wild. Although social animals, individuals act aloof and do not like touching. Adult males fight by pushing with their shoulders, battering by swinging their necks, and biting. Kicking may also be used in defense, more so with alpacas than llamas. Camelids, particularly alpacas, produce various vocalizations, but humming is the most common. Llamas may make clicking sounds, if agitated, When frightened, camelids may scream.

Llamas are highly territorial. As a result, young gelded llamas, 18-24 months old, that have been socialized with other llamas can be removed and socialized with other species to become guardians for those species, such as sheep. Intact males cannot be housed together and should not be used as guardians.

Camelids, particularly alpacas, may attempt to avoid a handler by holding its head down. The handler must be prepared when near the camelid for the possibility that the head may suddenly be raised up. Otherwise, it could hit an ill-prepared handler in the face.

Camelids are believed to be easier to handle if “imprinted” (handled within the first few hours of life). However, overhandling a young sexually intact male that is raised in isolation to other camelids can result in a failure to respect human handlers, a condition called “bezerk male syndrome.” Aggressive male camelids will put their ears back and its face dangerously near the handler’s face. They may stick their head forward and horizontal with the ground and charge to bump the handler with its shoulders and try to knock the handler to the ground. If successful in pinning the victim, it will bite at the victims face, neck, knees, and groin. Excessive handling of young male camelids should be avoided and orphaned male llamas that have had much human handling should be castrated before weaning.

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 10oF).

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.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Male camelids should not be pampered and/or raised in isolation from other camelids or they may become dangerous as adults.**
- 2. If present at 2 to 4 years of age, fighting teeth in camelids should be sawn off.**
- 3. Kushing, resting on their sternum, is often used a means of camelid passive resistance.**

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 . 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.