

## **Camelid Behavior**

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To start, there are many different resources available to read about camelid behavior. You must first realize that just as with other animal species, camelids come with every type of attitude and behavior that one can imagine. How you choose to approach them can have an everlasting effect on your future relationship with each individual animal.

For the sake of conversation in these notes I will refer to all llamas, alpacas, guanacos and vicunas as lamas or camelids. Just as they come in many different sizes, shapes or colors, they also come with many different attitudes. Typically guanacos and alpacas have been considered to have the calmest demeanor of the South American camelids. However some smaller alpacas can be as feisty as the largest llama. The purpose of these notes is to provide the reader a general overview of camelid behavior so that they can appreciate the different behaviors that may be encountered when working with these unique animals.

### **Spitting**

Spitting is the most common known behavior associated with camelids. Lamas can be fairly accurate at spewing gastric contents for 3–6 feet when annoyed or restrained. However, most are well-behaved and easy to handle. If verbally reprimanded, they can be educated NOT to spit off humans. The good thing is that the smell washes off after a few showers.

This is the typical way that intact male lamas, also called machos, tend to communicate with each other. The act of spitting is intended to send the message “leave me alone!” Females, also called hembras, usually submit to male for breeding without spitting. Pregnant females will usually spit off males when they are attempting to breed them. This behavior is commonly used to diagnose pregnancy by producers. However, there are many improper diagnoses of pregnancy in animal that have spitting behaviors associated with pseudo pregnancy, mucometria, pyometria, abnormal pregnancy or other reproductive abnormality. Occasionally, some animals may develop bad spitting behavior just because they can do it.

### **Fighting**

Intact male lamas typically have breeding as their top priority in life. These animals have a natural desire to perpetuate their genes. As a result, most will challenge other males for hierarchy in a herd to determine who will have first rights to breed female in a herd. Female camelids are induced ovulators and will breed year round. In the wild, males will commonly attempt to rebreed pregnant females in an effort to pass on their genes. This may sometime result in abortion of the pregnancies making the female susceptible to conceive again. Females are usually reluctant to participate but occasionally submit. Intact males that are housed together will regularly mount and attempt to breed each other.

Males fight viciously using their fighting teeth (upper incisor/canine and lower canine) to try to lacerate the jugular region and may also inflict an unpleasant bite during mating. For this reason, total canine tooth removal or repeated use of gigli wire and or dermal can be used to smooth the teeth off at the gum line. Canines will frequently grow back in uncastrated males. Some females and castrated male will also have fighting teeth.

### **Berserk Male Syndrome**

Lamas can kick and bite other lamas or people. An occasional animal, particularly orphaned males raised by hand, become imprinted on humans as youngsters, and demonstrate dangerous behavior towards humans. This condition is called the “berserk male syndrome.” These animals are extremely dangerous. Castration does not change the behavior of these “rogue” males, and owners are usually forced to have these animals euthanized. Be cautious when raising orphan male crias. They should be taught to pan feed as soon as possible to avoid having them imprint on human. Be very extra careful if asked to work with a rogue male llama. The majority of lamas are quiet, serene animals with kind dispositions, and no more dangerous than any other animal of its size.

### **Training**

One of the most important aspects to know when training a camelid is that they are a herd oriented animal. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage as you work with them. One of the benefits of their strong herding instinct is that this can make moving groups much easier. The animals will tend to stay together and make less work for all. It is best to stay outside their flight zone when attempting to move camelids.

All lamas should be trained to be led by halter and taught to push. This requires persistence and much patience by the handler. Some animals are very responsive to treats as rewards during training while others are not.

### **Handling**

Now that you've captured a camelid what do you do next? Try to maintain control of the lama with a minimum of stress and injury to either the animal or yourself. This may be easier said than done. Unhandled animals primarily just want to get away from you. There are some basic tricks that will help you keep control of the animal long enough to treat it. One of the oldest methods used has been “earring”. This technique involves bringing the hand not involved in head restraint up along the animal's neck and grabbing the outside ear. You should not use a twisting motion to control the animal, rather, simply squeeze the base of the ear firmly and hold as the animal is treated. This method should only be considered in extreme situations.

All Lamas should be trained to a halter. This should start at an early age (2-3 months). A proper fitting halter is necessary due to camelid nasal anatomy. A good portion of the nose directly behind the nostrils is cartilage rather than bone. Camelids are considered obligate nasal breathers. Improper halters will pinch off the nasal passage and cause panics. Make sure the halter is sized appropriately and does not cause unnecessary stress to the animals. Placing a

halter on a new animal and leaving it on for a few days is a common technique used to get them acquainted to this tool. Some trainers have tried tying animals up with halters for 30-60 minute intervals to help with training. Another restraint method used for alpacas is to rest your other hand on the point of the shoulders at the base of the neck and gently but firmly press downward. This should help you to control the animal and keep it still for any treatments necessary. For an animal that is continuously swinging around and not standing still, you may use your free hand to grasp the base of the tail to help hold them in one place. You may also have another person do the same for you, especially with larger animals.

A unique camelid behavior that can be used when handling them is the "cush." This term is used for animals when they lay in the prone or sternal position. Camelids can be trained to cush on command. This is very useful when animals are being transported but may cause challenged for certain portion of the physical examination or treatments.

## References

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Basics of Behavior and Handling of Llamas and Alpacas

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