



ALPACA FACT SHEET #6.01

Welfare, Education & Training Reviewed 2018

Alpacas as Herd or Flock Protectors

Introduction

Alpacas are one of four members of the South American camelid species. Like all camelids they are hardy, intelligent and gregarious animals that have evolved with strong herd social instincts. Both females and males are very protective of each other and especially of their young. The alpaca is generally very alert to any animal or person approaching its paddock, and has excellent eyesight over a kilometre.

While normally almost soundless, the alpaca can emit a piercing alarm scream when aroused to potential danger, alerting their herd and property owners.

Alpacas are normally gentle toward humans and other animals that are not seen as threatening but they have an innate dislike for canines and foxes. Their defense against such predators is to chase them away or pursue them and if necessary stamp at or on the predator with their front feet, rising off the ground onto their back legs if necessary before bringing their front legs down with considerable speed and force. Alpacas, when provoked in such a fashion, are very fast and will catch the predator in a short distance.

However it should be noted that not all alpacas will react in this way and deaths and injury from dog attacks in the UK are unfortunately not uncommon. Owners should therefore take special care that alpacas are not attacked by dogs.

The instinct for alpacas to bond with other grazing animal herds, and especially their proven ability to protect sheep and goats, has resulted in the growing use of wethered adult male alpacas as sheep flock guardians – especially during and after lambing and kidding. Cases have been recorded of wethers bravely standing in front of females and progeny in the corner of a paddock fending off multiple animal attacks. In some cases

a guardian alpaca has been killed by dogs while at least some of his flock survived. Alpacas are herd animals and must be kept with a number of others of their own species even when co-grazing with sheep etc.

Alpacas and the Environment

Like all camelids alpacas do not have hooves but soft-padded feet, each with two fairly soft toenails. Their ground foot pressure of 39 kPA is much less than sheep (82 kPA), cattle (185 kPA) and humans (95 kPA).

Alpacas differ slightly from true ruminants such as cattle and sheep because of the structure of their three-compartment stomachs. The alpaca's digestion is adapted to high fibre diets and their dietary efficiency is superior to goats and sheep on a similar high fibre diet.

Alpacas place their dung and urine in specific spots and do not usually graze close to these, thus avoiding ingesting internal parasites to which they generally also have high resistance. (If grazed with sheep, cattle or goats alpacas will pick up the same parasites, and a similar dosing regime will be needed).

Alpacas grow fibre that is valued for its luxurious handle and brightness/luster, and in a wide range of natural colours that is unique among commercial fibre producing animals. However, unlike many other animals, alpacas do not shed their fibre. Also, even when 'bonded' with an accompanying sheep flock and sleeping close by, alpacas will not come into physical contact with them unless forced to do by, for example, being held closely in a yard.

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The alpaca does not grow fibre underneath its short tail or in the breech area, and tends to avoid any contact with its urine or dung pellets due to the crouching nature of the alpaca during urination and defecation. They have very little lanolin in their fibre. Fly strike is seen but is mercifully rare. However it can occur especially in heavily fleeced animals and owners should still be vigilant. If seen flystrike must be attended to quickly as it will kill without rapid & effective treatment.

Guardian Alpaca Husbandry

The British Alpaca Society recommends that alpacas used as guardians for lambing ewe and breeding goat flocks should be fully grown adult males at least 18 months to two years old, and that castrated males [wethers/geldings] are used. Actual age will depend on the individual alpacas and indeed it is not a given that they will all be suitable guard animals.

It is recommended that castrations are only carried out when the males have reached adulthood and are fully grown (this is usually the case by the time they are 18 months to 2 years old) but will vary. Castrations must be carried out by a veterinarian.

Although entire males are equally capable as guardians, it is not recommended to use them as it has been known for entire males to mount sheep and inadvertently kill them.

The alpaca ideally should be introduced to the pregnant ewe flock about 4-6 weeks before lambing to allow time for bonding. However it is never too late to introduce guardians to a flock - even after lambing or kidding has begun. After initially patrolling the boundary, the guardians will soon remain fairly close to the flock for companionship, and will normally protect them from foxes. A single guardian has sometimes been seen 'minding' a group of young lambs while the mothers spread out to feed.

Guardian alpacas can be readily moved around the property with their accompanying flocks. If

using sheepdogs be aware that since dogs are often seen as a threat they may be attacked. It may be preferable to remove the alpacas prior to moving the sheep then reintroduce the alpacas. Extra care is needed to control dogs in their vicinity.

To avoid undue stress, an alpaca should never be kept alone in a paddock. When not needed as guardians it is preferable to keep several alpacas in a paddock near the farmhouse where they can become accustomed to farm dogs, and with occasional hand feeding they will be easy to handle.

They will eat sheep feed (and indeed other feedstuffs like grains etc.) given the opportunity so it is important to ensure you know the composition and take measures should there be any potential issues (eg Copper levels)

With normal husbandry, guardian alpacas should remain active and useful for at least 15 years, aided by lower teeth that erupt to replace wear. Alpacas need to be shorn annually.

Shearing

Because of their long legs and neck it is best to restrain the alpaca on its side. The animal should be reasonably firmly restrained by front and rear ropes and the head should be held by an assistant.

The alpaca should be quite comfortable in this form of restraint. When shearing with a view to using the fibre it is best practice for the blanket area should be sheared first to avoid coarse fibres contaminating it. It is best to book an alpaca shearer well in advance as they can be very busy during shearing season. Make sure you know what they require and be prepared.

If you wish to learn to shear alpacas there are a number of shearers who run courses and who will normally be happy to advise about shearing, methods of restraint and what to do with the shorn fleece. Also other alpaca breeders are usually very happy to give you the benefit of their wisdom!



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Other considerations

As with all other livestock annual procedures include teeth being checked (both males and females can develop very sharp 'fighting' canine teeth although these only *usually* present a risk with entire adult males) and their toenails being trimmed (usually every three to four months), unless they are kept on stony ground that will wear them down naturally (fairly unlikely in the UK).

Vaccinations:

Alpacas also need bi-annual clostridial disease vaccinations - annual vaccinations are no longer considered sufficient by many veterinarians. The sheep dose is recommended. This should be discussed with your veterinarian.

Parasite control:

All Parasite control should also be discussed with your veterinary surgeon.

Feed:

Alpaca Guards will maintain condition on sheep feed, however as they do not have the ability to lick, a mineral/feed supplementation via a lick is not effective, so a loose mix supplementation is therefore preferable.

The BAS would also like to thank Dr. Graham R Duncanson for his help in checking these documents

Disclaimer: The management practices detailed in this overview do not constitute veterinary advice. Any alpaca appearing to have an adverse condition should be assessed by a veterinarian.