

The Environmental Animal of the 90's

Llamas don't bite, don't dig, don't bark and don't have fleas. They are dependable companions for packing and jogging. Llamas can be trained to pull carts and carry children. Llamas are not like "livestock", but more like family pets. They soon become a family project with husband, wife, kids and grandkids all joining in on the fun and enjoyment of raising these wonderful companions.

Background Basics

Llamas are members of the camel (camelid) family. Camelids originated on the central plains of North America where they lived 40 million years ago. Three million years ago llama-like animals dispersed to South America. By the end of the last ice age (10,000-12,000 years ago) camelids were extinct in North America. Llamas were domesticated from guanacos in the Andean highlands of Peru 4,000-5,000 years ago and are among the oldest domestic animals in the world. Primarily a beast of burden, they provided native herdsman with meat, wool for clothing, hide for shelter, pellets for fuel and offerings to their gods. Today there are an estimated 50,000 llamas in the United States and Canada.

Physical Facts

Life span:

About 20 years

Average height:

45" at shoulder, 5-6' at the head

Average weight:

250-400 lbs.

Average gestation:

350 days

Birth:

A single baby (cria) is normally born, without assistance, from a standing mother during daylight hours. Twinning is rare.

Babies:

Average birth weight is 18-35 lbs. Babies are normally up and nursing within 90 minutes. They are weaned at about 5-6 months.

Reproduction:

Females are first bred at 14-18 months of age. Llamas do not have a heat cycle but are induced ovulators (ovulation occurs 24-36 hours after breeding). Thus they can be bred at any time of the year.

Color:

Wool ranges from white to black, with shades of gray, beige, brown, red and roan between. It may be solid, spotted or marked in an array of patterns.

Health:

Because llamas and their ancestors are specially suited to the harsh environment of their Andean homeland, North American owners will find them remarkably hardy, healthy, easy to care for and virtually disease-free.

Llamas are environmentally sensitive, intelligent creatures. Their feet, comprised of soft pads with 2 toenails, impact the environment less than the boots of an average hiker, yet llamas are strong. A conditioned llama can carry approximately 25% to 30% of its body weight, making a llama as strong, if not stronger, than a horse. *That is, as a pack animal - Dale Graham.*

Llamas are great working partners and family pets. They have predictable, calm responses to new situations. Llamas are trustworthy. Their intelligent, gentle nature allows even small children to interact with them. The fiber of llamas can be spun and woven into sweaters, blankets, hats and the like. Llamas are used in animal facilitative therapy because of their calming effects. Families can get involved with llamas in 4-H, Scouts and other youth groups.

Llamas have discreet bathroom habits. Their pelleted droppings, similar to a deer, are virtually odorless and are generally deposited in the communal dung pile. This neatness minimizes parasite contamination, reduces fly problems and makes cleanup easier for the owner. A llama's effective digestive system also helps to eliminate introduction of noxious weeds into the environment.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What are they used for?

Uses include breeding stock; wool production; pack animals; therapy; driving animals and companion animals.

Are they intelligent?

Llamas are intelligent and easy to train. In just 1-5 repetitions they will pick up and retain many skills such as accepting a halter, being led, loading in and out of a vehicle, pulling a cart or carrying a pack.

Can you use their wool?

Oil free, lightweight llama wool is warm and luxurious and popular with spinners and weavers.

Are they good pack animals?

Llamas are excellent packers. Their two-toed foot with its leathery bottom pad gives llamas a great sure-footedness. This foot, and the llamas ability to browse, give the llama an impact on the environment equivalent to that of a large deer.

What and how much do they eat?

Llamas are a modified ruminant with a three-compartment stomach. They chew their cud like cattle and sheep. Because of a relatively low protein requirement due to their efficient digestive systems, they can be kept on a variety of pastures or hay. One llama eats approximately 4 bales of hay per month.

What is their personality like?

These highly social animals need the companionship of their species. Independent yet shy, llamas are gentle and curious. Their calm nature and common sense make them easy for anyone, even children, to handle.

How do they communicate?

Llamas communicate with a series of ear, body and tail postures, as well as a shrill alarm call and a humming sound.

Do they spit?

Spitting is the llamas way of saying "Bug Off!" Normally used between llamas to divert annoying suitors, ward off a perceived threat or, most commonly, to establish pecking order at mealtime, an occasional llama who has been forced to tolerate excessive human handling may have developed an intolerance for or a fear of humans and will spit if they feel threatened by them.

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