

Introduction to Llamas

A General Description

Llamas are intelligent, well-mannered, clean and attractive animals with definite, individual personalities. Llamas are of the camelid species and supported evidence indicates they were domesticated as early as 3000 B.C. There are four varieties belonging to the Lama family -- the alpaca, vicuna, guanaco and llama. The two varieties of camel are distant cousins.

The llama is used in South America for wool producing, beasts of burden and as a food source. The foot of the llama is split with toes, soft padded sole and hard nails. Adult llamas may vary in height from approximately 36 to 48 inches at the shoulder. Weights, when grown, range from 250 to 500 pounds. White, roan, red, brown, gray, black, appaloosa and variations of all of these colors are found on llamas.

History and Sources

The history of llamas goes back thousands of years to when their ancestors were native to North America. They are currently native only to the high mountain areas of Peru and Bolivia, but are found in other South American countries.

Llamas were imported to the United States in the 1800's by several prominent people, the most notable being William Randolph Hearst. Imports were stopped in the 1930's due to concern over hoof and mouth disease. Late 1983, the importation ban was lifted and several hundred animals were imported into this country from Chile. In March, 1984, importation from South America was suspended due to hoof and mouth disease infestation by infiltration of animals from Argentina to Chile. There are thought to be around 40,000 to 50,000 llamas in the entire United States today; a very small overall herd size.

Shelter, Feeding, Pasturing and Routine Health Care

Five foot high fencing will usually contain a llama and a three-sided shed is sufficient weather protection from wind and rain. Cold

weather and even snow does not always force them to seek shelter, but most llamas prefer to get in out of the rain and extreme heat. Llamas do not require special feed and do well on pasture grass and hay. They need a trace mineral supplement and clean water. Many owners feed alfalfa hay and dry mixed feeds. It is best to seek a veterinarian's advice on proper nutrition needs for your area. Protein content of feed is important as are trace minerals. Although a llama can live in a relatively small pasture area, overcrowding can be harmful. Llamas can live alone, but as a herd animal are much happier and thrive better with other llamas. Domestic dog packs can be very dangerous, so fences should be secure to guard against their entry. Most owners routinely give their animals normal livestock vaccinations and worming as prescribed by their local veterinarian.

Reproduction

The female llama is bred at 18 months by some breeders if her overall size and maturity warrants it; however 24 months is a safe breeding age. Normal gestation is 335 to 355 days and single births are the rule. Babies are generally born in the daylight hours and usually the mother does not need assistance. The male llama usually begins breeding at or about 36 months although some may be used at a younger age. Male llamas are often neutered at 24 months when not needed for breeding. Babies are weaned at around 5 to 6 months of age.

Llama Behavior

Llamas are normally silent and may appear to be a bit distant when you first approach. They are most often curious about something new, especially children and strangers. Llamas hum, cluck or warble on occasion. Llamas give definite signals of communication by their head and tail positions. Spitting is generally reserved for other llamas. Spitting at humans is the exception, not the rule.

Training and Transportation

Llamas are quite intelligent and respond to patience and good training practices. With

proper training they are very adaptable to all sorts of activities. When you go jogging, your llama may like to run with you. Hiking is a favorite outing.

The llama can fit into a volkswagen bus, a station wagon or a covered pickup truck. To carry several llamas, a horse trailer can be used. Most llamas handle transportation quite well, often lying down while observing the scenery.

Packing with Llamas

A llama can carry from 60 to 100 pounds, depending on the individual animal and circumstances. Normally only the males are used for packing. Llamas are not generally ridden, but children have used llamas for this purpose.

With its easy-going nature, the llama is a great packing animal. Little extra food needs to be packed on short hikes as the llama will forage on grass and other greens along the trail.

Wool Production and User

Llamas can be shorn, or the wool (properly called fiber) can be combed out. Depending on the animal, you can get as much as seven pounds of fiber every other year. The market for wool is especially popular with hand spinners and is often mixed with sheep's wool.