

Alpaca Behaviour

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE ARTICLE by **Elizabeth Paul** > Erehwon Alpacas, VIC
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Many alpaca owners have come to the fascinating world of alpacas with very limited experience of any kind of animals, or their behaviour, either as a group or as individuals. Some new owners or breeders with small herds have run into problems with young males, which may be a nuisance at first, but which can quickly develop into a more serious situation. This may happen when alpacas are given the wrong kind of attention and petting from their owners, or when they are allowed to intrude into the owners' personal space because the behaviour is seen as 'cute'. In due course, the alpaca may try to start dominating the human, in the same way as it would start challenging for its place in the herd. In order to make more effective management decisions with our animals, we need to understand their behaviour from their point of view.

Wild Camelid Behaviour

In the wild, a mature male guanaco or vicuña marks out a territory (often with dung piles) and defends his patch, and the family group within it, against all comers. By the time the season's crias of both sexes reach about 12 months of age, he will expel them from his group, and they usually never return. The young females will be gathered into other family groups, thus avoiding close inbreeding. Young males form bachelor herds, without strong territorial bonds. As they don't have females or territory to fight over, they get along reasonably well with each other. These herds roam around waiting for an established male to die or become incapable of defending his patch, when the strongest/most mature male from the bachelor herd can challenge him and take over.¹ On the farm of course, the farm manager decides who will get the top job.

Paddock Behaviour

Alpacas, like all other animals, have a personal space boundary, and a place within the group. Each animal knows or is soon told by other members of the group of its place in the hierarchy. It also knows which other alpacas in the group it can dominate in turn. As a cria grows its place changes; and adding a new member to the group will involve a re-structuring of the hierarchy, which can be stressful for all concerned.

Body language is the communicating tool most used by alpacas to maintain their place in the herd. In a quiet, unstressed environment subtle shifts of ears, tail and neck are generally sufficient. Threat displays involve broadside posturing, tilting head back, and spitting.

The earliest behaviour of a cria is imprinted at birth. It is programmed to follow larger moving objects, and to sit beside or under large objects. The cria in Figure 1 has found a much bigger (therefore better) 'mother' than her birth mother to sit under. ➤



Figure 1. Size matters!

Nursing behaviour involves the cria lowering its head to get under its mother's belly. The tail is also usually flipped right over on to the back (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Cria approaching dam for a drink, with submissive signs of tail flip and lowered neck.

Similar behaviour may be displayed later when the cria approaches or passes any other older alpaca (Figure 3). It signals the lower rank of the younger one, and reduces the likelihood of an aggressive response to a possible challenge.



Figure 3. Modified submission in a weanling deferring to older white male, with tail flip and averted head.

The cria that approaches a person with its head lowered and tail up over its back, is signalling the same way it would signal an older or more dominant alpaca. More subtle intrusive behaviour includes sniffing at crotch areas or feet, pulling shoelaces, rubbing up against the person, or even lying down and rolling over on the person's feet like a dog. (And a dog will do these things, for the same reason – to establish dominance). Crias like this have an identity crisis, i.e. they do not see humans as 'others' but rather, part of their own herd. These advances should be firmly and clearly rejected as unacceptable, without of course resorting to heavy physical interaction with the cria, which will only escalate the problem.

Orphaned crias, even if being bottle fed, should be left with the nursing herd if at all possible, and not be raised like bottle fed pet lambs. Crias are pretty good milknippers. In Figure 4 the smaller cria has discovered that if he waits for a female to get settled with nursing, he can steal a drink from between her legs. His own mother is sitting behind him. Orphans may even find a surrogate mum to take them on. In fact I have seen a cria, orphaned at two months, be adopted by an older female which had been dry for two years, but started nursing again.



Figure 4. Milk nipper.

Figure 5 shows a 'Mexican standoff' situation between two females of nearly equal rank. The female in the foreground is a little younger, but obviously thinks enough of herself to challenge the older grey behind her.



Figure 5. Broadside display between two females of about equal size and status. The younger female in foreground is the challenger.

The four square stance with the tail held rigidly away from the body makes her look bigger. The older female reinforces her status with a direct look back at the upstart. No doubt she will spit next, if the younger one fails to give way. Physical attacks are, however, not common between females.

Even very young male crias will mount other alpacas (including their own mothers when they are sitting down) in imitation of adult male behaviour (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Mounting (and spit off) behaviour starts very early.

Males will also play fight from an early age, which involves chest butting, neck wrestling, and biting at ears, necks, groins and feet areas. Young males which stand on their hind legs at the gate, or run along the fence line and stand on their hind legs when food is brought out to them are starting to display aggression towards people. (Males should not be handfed). They may stand broadside on with tail out, at a distance, when the owner comes into the paddock. They may even start running up to a person, with their head lowered to the ground and weaving from side to side. These are all preliminaries to see if the challenge to fight will be met. ►

Some breeders have reported feeling uneasy when they go into a male's paddock, but are not sure why. If they feel threatened, there is probably a very good reason for it. Alpacas, like dogs, also know the sex differences in humans. Some breeders have observed that their male challenges either the husband or the wife; the husband presumably because he is a male and therefore a threat, or the wife because she is female and should be dominated.

The young male in Figure 7 has launched himself at his mother, with all four feet off the ground, in a chest butting display. His knees are raised to chest level, creating a very effective battering ram. He, presumably, wants to distract her away from being too interested in someone else's new cria. In a real fight, he will try to knock his opponent down in this way and then kneel on him.

Under no circumstances should this kind of physical contact be activated, between alpacas and humans.



Males who do any of the things described above need more activity, more alpaca company and reduced or different human contact. Finding a few mates of his own age for a solitary young male is probably the best thing to do, and the more the merrier. Changing the males to a new paddock occasionally, or putting food in the barn and calling the males in, reduces their attachment to a particular territory. Even being taken for a walk on a halter, puts the human back in charge.

Berserk Males

This term is used for an alpaca or llama, which shows continuous, extremely aggressive behaviour towards everything, other alpacas and humans alike. Berserk males will cause havoc in a group of other males, destroy existing hierarchies, and attack people.

In the USA, most young male llamas, raised in petting zoos, have to be put down before they reach two years of age, because they simply become too dangerous to be near humans at all.² Berserk males are not re-trainable. Responsible alpaca breeders and owners will take steps to not create them. ■

References

1. Franklin W.L., "The High Wild World of the Vicuña", National Geographic, Vol 143, No 1, Jan 1973.
2. Hoffman E. and Fowler M., "The Alpaca Book - Management, Medicine, Biology, and Fiber", Clay Press Inc., Herald, California, USA, 1995.

Figure 7. In full flight - a cria launches himself at his mother in a chestbutting display.

The sequence of photographs below was taken by Pippa Smith (Applegum Alpacas, QLD) when an established stud male was introduced to a new group of wethers. The body language says it all!



Notice the submissive posture of tails up. Then the older male picks on a less submissive one and attacks. Eventually, this young male took flight and hid alone amongst some trees at the bottom of the paddock, while the remaining males followed the stud male obsequiously!