

Llamas as Livestock Guards

By Meg Steensland

Why guard llamas? If you are a regular reader of CQ and already have alpacas, sheep, goats, mini-horses, geese, ducks, emus, or exotic poultry pastured with llamas, then you already know the value of llamas as livestock guards. If not, and you are a llama breeder, then maybe you are missing an opportunity to promote the use of guard llamas to livestock farmers and ranchers nearby.

Or perhaps you are a breeder of one or more of these predator-target specie and reading this article for information. It is the author's intent to provide useful information regardless of in which camp you find yourself.

Shadowbrook Farm's Experience with Guard Llamas

In December of 2002 we took advantage of a rare chance to buy two Jacob bred ewes from a local breeder who was downsizing his operation. After doing some research and finding studies^{1,2} that essentially reported that pastures guarded by llamas did not lose sheep to coyotes, I decided I needed a llama. I began searching for one even before finishing work on the pasture situated in the middle of the woods well back of the barn area.

I purchased a 1999 female, Crystal, and her nine-month old son, Ramon, (a pair) as that is apparently the way some breeders choose to place male llamas they do not need. I hoped to be able to split them eventually as we had fenced in two areas to allow for rotation and off season ram space. The llamas were delivered and 'installed' in one of the pasture for a few days by themselves to give them ownership of the space. Then the sheep were brought in, first one

adult and her lamb and then the other. I later learned that this was unnecessary.

Leap forward a couple of years; we have added a large two-area pasture near the road, on a US highway, to show off the beautiful livestock. The female has had a female cria (Nancy) and we have added two companion females (Alpha and Omega), as well as a large gelding that needed a home. The gelding and one of the three young females drew guard duty in the original pasture in the woods. Crystal and the two young females stood guard in the road pasture, with the young girls being rotated weekly. We later let the people from whom we bought the first llamas install their farm sign and add one of their pretty spotted geldings to that pasture. During the first winter Nancy's older brother, Ramon, was assigned to guard the rams and ducks... when he was not busy with the sheep.



Nancy and Red patrolling the fence line.

The Attack Incident

Now it is the summer of 2005 and we experience the first coyote incident that I am aware of. Based on reports of neighbors, who found a lair, I am sure there were coyote sightings by the llamas of which I was never aware. Surprisingly, the August 2005 event happened in the pasture by the highway, not the remote site in the woods. The incident was reported in



Chex the guard llama that chased the coyote.⁴⁵



Katahdin sheep marked by coyote.⁴⁵

the October 2005 issue of ILReport³. The only reason we know of this attack is because the llama sounded the alarm call when he got hung up, trying to run off the predator. Also, we found a muddy print on one of the sheep the next day.

My neighbor, who heard the alarm call around 11PM, phoned me and then helped get the llama off the fence and haltered for the walk to the barn. The next day I returned llama MFL Chex to his owner so it could be determined if he needed medical attention; fortunately he did not. We later decided not to return Chex to that pasture. He did move on to live with a new owner, to be a guard, and is dearly loved for his work there.

After losing Chex, I moved the large gelding, Silver Bud, to the road pasture as the anchor llama, moving another, now two-year old female to the back. The big gelding worked the road pasture until June of 2006 when a sheep breeder purchased him.

Our Placement Experience

After the coyote attack, one of my goat-owning neighbors decided she wanted a llama. Before I had the opportunity to find one for her, she had signed up another farm that wanted two. I had to find some to lease out or risk depleting my own pastures. A llama owner who was downsizing was only too happy to provide candidates. I bought six from them but later found only two were ready and suitable to send out immediately as guard llamas. In the end, I had to part with one of my 2003 girls to satisfy this need. I selected my biggest, friendliest llama - Omega, the one everyone loved - and kept the other four for more training. Two of these were later placed.

In all, during 2005 and 2006 we placed seven llamas as guards on sheep and goat farms. Some of them I had to buy from others and bring home and train. Some were fit to go almost immediately and several llamas that I bought are not suitable to use as guards for one reason or another. (One is 22 years old and was purchased to give her a final home and the other is very tall and difficult to halter.)

Four of these trial placements or

rentals resulted in sales, one came back because he was too good at escaping (Ramon) and another came back due to the shepherd moving the flock to the barn for the winter and not wanting the llama in the barn.

We got several offers for Nancy as a guard, but I was reluctant to part with her. One woman wanted Nancy because upon her return from vacation she found her llama dead in the pasture. I did not want to place Nancy in such a situation and sent her looking elsewhere. In March 2007 we got an offer from the woman who is now my first-choice veterinarian and an alpaca owner. After she expressed an interest in Nancy, we sent her (the vet) to several other farms. In the end she decided she wanted Nancy. So Nancy was placed.

One consequence of this experience is that I will not have difficulty placing another favorite llama if the placement feels right for the llama as well as the client. The window into my placement philosophy is: It must be good for the llama, for the client, and for me and the remaining herd.

Predators

Canines - both domestic and free running dogs and coyotes are the main predators sheep and goat breeders are concerned with in much of the USA. Foxes and raccoons will take poultry, unless the fowl can get into the llama quarters. Stock keepers in select USA areas may also find that bears and large cats - pumas, cougars and mountain lions - are the predators to protect against.

While llamas can be effective guards against canines, they can act only as alarm agents for bears and cats. It should be noted that a lone llama may not be much of a deterrent to a pack of canines, be they domestic dogs or wild coyotes. The best a lone guard can do is sound an alarm that might trigger a light or alert the rancher to take some action.

There are also some small predators that llamas may not protect against and, in fact, may be targets for as well as the guarded stock. These are bats, ferrets, mink, and weasels. I interviewed an individual in OH that lost two llamas - one to an attack by their dog and a second llama to bat bites.

In both of these cases, the owner did not seek immediate veterinarian

intervention. It is possible she lost the dog-attack llama due to an ulcer, The llama with the bat bite just went downhill gradually, according to the owner. They later found that the bat bite was on the inside of the forelegs and it only came to the attention of the owner after the llama was 'down'. This illustrates the need to monitor behavior of individuals - stock and guards - daily to avoid 'sudden' losses. This is a point of education that should be carried out by the farm placing the guard. To avoid insulting the shepherd, it may be wise to stress that the guard llama needs to be monitored for changes in behavior as carefully as they monitor the guarded stock.

Choosing Candidate Guards - Points to Consider

Cost - Many people seeking livestock guard llamas choose a gelded male based mostly on acquisition cost. There is usually an abundance of males and breeders cannot keep them all. They will often offer extras as guards charging about \$500 (in OH). A gelded male over two years of age must have his fighting teeth removed, otherwise he may injure the male livestock he is guarding. An intact male past the age of two should never be sold for use with female livestock. Female llamas can also serve as guards, as my experience bears out. They are generally more costly (\$800 and up in OH). Sometimes one can be found that is beyond breeding age or has been culled from the breeding program because of a poor genetic trait. Some shepherds have found that purchasing 'cheap' llamas at auction works for them while others have been burned with chronically ill or unruly llamas. Burned once, such shepherds may not want to take another chance on a good guard. The breeder who encounters such clients will need to take extra care in choosing the right guard for them. One of my Jacob breeder friends first populated his farm with auction livestock, including two llamas that escaped and caused trouble with neighbors until he finally 'got rid of' the llamas. Now he will occasionally borrow a llama to exhibit at his farm when he has visitors, or to take to an event in the city.

Training - The llama absolutely must be easy to catch and halter in a catch-pen; sheep and goat breeders will not tolerate a recalcitrant or wild llama. Such a

breeder may be intimidated by the sheer size of the llama, so the farm placing the guard needs to conduct an on-farm tutorial in llama handling. It may be necessary to bring, or help the client make, a 10'x10' catch pen at the new site. If the llama cannot be handled successfully in his new placement, there is a risk he will not receive the routine care and monitoring to which he is entitled.



Guard llama checking new pasture arrival.

Bonding -The guard llama must also bond with the livestock and consider itself part of their group. A llama that is timid or aloof and not capable of socializing with others would not be a good choice as a guard. But, if you are placing a pair of llamas, it may be good to choose a 'bonder' to stay with the flock and a more aloof companion to patrol the perimeter.

Fiber/Maintenance - Another important factor is fiber type. A heavy wool llama running in burdock is going to get badly matted and may be subject to heat stress if not given a full body shearing. Preference should be for light wool or medium wool just as a maintenance issue. Regarding color, which a llama breeder may view as non-relevant - the breeder should explain that darker llamas may be candidates for heat stress. They should also demonstrate or explain the proper way to use a water hose to cool off an overheated llama by hosing down the legs and underbelly but **not** the back. The farm placing the guard may need to address these topics, especially if the client has selected a heavywool beauty that will no longer be such a beauty in a wild pasture. These are client education issues.

Conducting the Training - The best way to train the prospective guard llama is to pasture the candidate llama with the type of livestock he or she will guard. Our young llamas grow up with sheep underfoot, so their dams do most of the training. Llamas we obtain otherwise

need to be introduced to a few sheep at a time and watched, at least in the beginning. After several weeks in one pasture, new llamas are rotated to a different pasture with new conditions - sheep as well as other llamas and different shelter arrangements. A llama trained to guard sheep can also be easily switched to goats and vice-versa.

A llama that patrols the fence-line and gives the alarm call (sounds like a car alarm) is doing the job you are asking him to do. One that goes off by himself and lies under a tree, ignoring his pasture mates, is not working. If you have several llamas in the same pasture, you will notice that they rotate who is patrolling and who is grazing with the livestock. Some people advocate against using several llamas - I do not. In fact, I favor having at least two in a pasture area.

Besides having stock and guards pastured together, you are also feeding the stock and the guards together. How you do this is also part of the llama's training. It is important to demonstrate respect for the stock and for the llamas. Do not let stock shove the llamas away from their feed and do not let llamas interfere with feeding the stock they are guarding. Feeding them on different levels - top of fence feeders for llamas and knee or ground-level troughs for sheep - is one such arrangement. Another solution might be to run the smaller livestock into a catch pen or shelter for feeding while the llamas are excluded from that grain long enough for the smaller animals to finish eating.

Another way to foster respect is to introduce any new pasture entrant to the llama first - let him smell the newcomer and 'kiss' his nose. Llamas will automatically find newborn stock and stand nearby. Sometimes that is how the shepherd will know new lambs have arrived - by the llama's behavior.

As noted above, it is a good idea to try the llama out in a different pasture with different individuals (not necessarily a different breed) and even different housing to make sure he can transition the skill to another location. If he sulks or stays in the barn or hums to himself all day, then he is unhappy and he is not yet transitioning the skill. If, on the other hand, he explores the new place with gusto and enthusiasm and greets his new companions, he is doing fine and you should expect a successful outcome for him elsewhere as a guard.

Reasons to Place

The best reason to place a guard llama, be it a female or a gelded male, is that it has been trained and will be an asset to the buyer, and a good representative of your farm. Ideally the buyer will be happy with the guard and will recommend you to someone else. They may come back to purchase another llama because they are so impressed with the behavior and other characteristics of the first llama. If you are unsure of this outcome or will not be available to coach the new owner on fine points of llama maintenance, then you should delay the placement until you can expect this outcome. Or you should refer the buyer to another breeder.

Reasons Not to Place

Having too many - males, old ones, brown ones, mouths-to-feed, etc - is not a good reason to deliver a llama, that is supposed to serve as a guard, to an unsuspecting new owner. At best, it will work out eventually, but you may lose an opportunity to build a relationship based on trust with the buyer.

At worst, you may be risking the life of that llama and your reputation as a diligent llama breeder in the llama community as well as among local livestock stewards.

Client Education

Ideally, you will visit the site to be guarded. This will give you an opportunity to evaluate the housing, feeding, and fencing arrangements and tailor your educational guidance appropriately. Owners of sheep and goats will need to know that their guard llama may need a slightly higher protein grain mix. This can be achieved by adding alfalfa pellets (also called beef pellets) to the stock grain. The use of CDT and Bo-Se would be the same, just higher doses. It is likely the new owners will need to use a different worm regimen. You can also find out if they have a working relationship with a veterinarian or not (just listen for horror tales of lost livestock or waiting too long to call a vet). A site visit will also let you determine if there are poisonous plants nearby that the stock owner may not be aware of yet (e.g wild cherry leaves blowing from a neighbor's field).

Pitfalls

If you have not yet sold or placed a llama - guard or otherwise - then you need to

evaluate if you are psychologically ready to do so. Are you ready to let go of this creature and let someone else take responsibility for it or will you be calling every other day to check on it? On the other side of the coin, what if the new owner intrudes too heavily on your time for too long after the placement?

I did not adequately consider these questions with the llamas I bought to place as guards, especially intrusion on my time. But thus far this has not been a serious problem and, for the most part, I am always eager and able to help.

On the issue of parting with a favorite llama; one must decide if the placement is good for the llama. In placing Nancy, the first llama born on my farm, I was forced to look at this perspective and it colored my view on placements. The placement needs to be a Win-Win-Win deal. It must work for the client, the llama, and the farm supplying the guard.

We have already covered how it works for the client and the llama. How it works for the farm supplying the guard llama is that it releases a spot for another llama or frees up a segment of worker time that may be applied elsewhere.

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About the Author

Meg Steensland lives in Mount Gilead OH where she and her family tend a small flock of purebred Jacob and Navajo-Churro sheep and train llamas (25 on site in 2007) as guards, show and events animals. They have done Christmas pageants(5) and church and humane society fund raisers as well as nursing home visits, parades and birthday parties with both sheep and llamas. Prior to finding their 75 acre farms in 1999, she and her husband worked in various assignments as chemists, translators, software engineers and project coordinators at a well known nonprofit in Columbus OH for over 30 years each. In 2006 Meg joined with others to start a Jacob Sheep Fanciers club that meets several times a year to discuss animal health as well as management and fiber issues. The club's January 2008 meeting featured a fiber expert who gave hands-on spinning demonstrations with various fibers and wheels. Meg may be contacted by e-mail at beegal7@yahoo.com