

## *Imports Just Want to Have Fun! or Retraining the Problem Import*

*By Marty McGee Bennett*

**C**amelids are all individuals. They don't all act the same way and it is not useful to treat them all the same when working with them. One technique might offer the perfect solution for one animal and be entirely ineffective on another. The best of all possible worlds is to have numerous of tools and techniques available to you. As a person who teaches people how to handle and train camelids, I find it helpful to categorize animals so that I can help their owners cope with them. There are distinct classes of difficulties and one of the most common is the *problem import*. These animals develop a myriad of behavioral patterns as they deal with the challenges inherent in making their way around the world.

Imported animals must cope with confinement for sometimes months at a time. They are taken away from a familiar environment and faced with total change; everything from their pasture mates to the food they eat. They must live in close quarters while having very little to do. They are poked, prodded and tested by people that may very well be short on experience with camelids and have a schedule to maintain. Since most, if not all of these animals don't know how to lead and have been in a herd their whole lives, they are often dragged around by the head when it is necessary to move them.

Having said that, not every import comes out at the end of the tunnel a screaming mee-mee. In my experience

difficult animals are usually born difficult. These animals are usually very bright or very "not so bright." They may have trouble figuring out what is wanted or, may use their extra intelligence to subvert what they know is expected. Camelids are proud, dramatic and oppositional. Like their kindred spirit cats, they hate to be restrained. They do not like to be controlled and do not feel safe unless they can get away. The process of importation is for many, their worst nightmare. They develop coping mechanisms to help them through their respective situations. These coping strategies may include screaming, spitting, kushing, or all of the above. These behaviors may be accompanied by involuntary loosening of the bowels and or bladder.

Often these difficult imports appear so distressed by any handling that owners will decide that the best course of action is to leave them alone.

But can we leave an animal in our care alone? Camelids must be wormed and vaccinated, toenail trimming is essential and we must come to their aid if they are wounded or are experiencing a difficult birth. We simply cannot leave them alone. Camelids do not distinguish between halter training sessions and a rectal exam. Every time we are with our animals our behavior determines their attitude about us.

Well intentioned owners feel they are giving their difficult imported animals a big break by leaving them alone as much as possible and by only handling them when it is necessary for herd management chores. From our point of view, these imported llamas or alpacas are getting a 360 day vacation and they should be grateful to us for that big break! The animal does not see it that way. From your camelids point of view: "The only time a human has anything to do with me it seems to be rather unpleasant and stressful." This is just what they experienced from humans during the importation process. The only difference now is frequency. In their experience humans *never just take you for a walk, rub your neck or scratch your back. They always do annoying unpleasant things.*

In my opinion it is critical to spend time with imports and do things that ease their fear and create a different kind of expectation. It is also very important to do

your best to perform herd management tasks in the easiest, least invasive ways possible and minimize restraint whenever you can. My entire training and handling program is designed to meet these needs. It is not possible in this one article to go over all the methods and techniques I use to accomplish herd management tasks with a minimum of hassle for you and your camelids imports. I have covered other aspects of handling and management in other articles and will continue to do so. In addition, this information is available in many formats - books, videos, my website and best of all clinics. My techniques benefit all camelids but are especially useful when rehabilitating difficult imports. What I will address in this article are problem solving techniques for the most common behavioral problems associated with imports as they do have some unique management issues.

Imagine as you look at your camelid that he or she has a control panel just like the dashboard of your car. There are certain buttons you can choose to push or NOT. When you push these buttons you will get very predictable results just as you do when you turn your windshield wipers on or toot your horn. Difficult imports come equipped with a scream button, a kush button and a spit button. Most people want to avoid these behaviors yet do not understand what they are doing to push the buttons. If you push these buttons the behaviors will undoubtedly happen just as surely as if you had tooted the horn.

### ***CATCHING THE IMPORT:***

Changing the way you catch your import is the first and best way to avoid all the unpleasant buttons. Your import is expecting to be cornered grabbed held and perhaps dragged and responds by screaming, spitting or kushing. By catching your llama or alpaca by a different means, you can avoid pushing these buttons as well as the unwanted behaviors.

Herd your import and another calm animal friend into a catch pen. (10 x 10 or 9 x 9 feet square is ideal) Get yourself a wand, pole or light weight herding tool (approx. 4 feet long) and tie a lightweight rope (approx. 10 feet long) to it. You are going fishing for camelids. Maintain your body position behind the



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eye of the animal and in the center of the pen. Raise your rope up and over the animal you intend to catch and simply guide the rope over the head. (see above) Once you have both ends of the rope, untie the wand and you have caught your camelid. I know this might seem cumbersome but so is taking a shower every time you catch your animal. It has been my experience that if this technique is used for catching difficult animals, they will quickly begin to stand quietly and allow you to simply walk up and slip a rope around their neck. Using this method, you need not corner them (very scary) and you can simply help them stand still with the rope as you walk up to them.

How you respond with the rope once you have it around the neck is your next opportunity to avoid the dreaded buttons. Use your rope to help keep your animal student in balance over all four legs, particularly the front legs. (see right) An animal standing in balance feels to be in greater control and safer. This applies particularly to the difficult imported animal. Use the rope to give a series of signals, each with a distinct release until your animal is standing next to you with slack in the rope.

It is now appropriate to proceed to haltering. As you halter give your animal more room than you normally do. Most people are in the habit of pulling their camelids up close as they put the halter on. Try giving your llama or alpaca almost the full length of your arms instead. In this way you will be able to see your animal students feet and can tell if he is standing in balance.

**SPITTING:** It is unpleasant to be spat on. On the other hand the imported animal has developed the spitting habit probably for good reason. Yelling, hitting, spraying with water, or spitting back may temporarily suppress the behavior but is probably not the best way to change your wooly buddy's mind about people over long haul. The catching method outlined above in my experience eliminates most of the problem as spitting is usually a response to being cornered. This method will also allow you to control the head early on in the catching and haltering process and turn the head away from you if the spitting persists. I think turning the animals head is all that is appropriate in terms of a

direct response to the behavior. If you engage in very intermittent eye contact and remember to breathe it will help greatly. Let go of thoughts like "Don't you dare!" Thoughts like this will be reflected in your body language and your camelid will react negatively.

**SCREAMING:** It is my theory that imported camelids learn to scream as a way of coping with extreme unpleasantness. When a camelid is screaming it is the most immediate and only thing that is going on. The screaming literally drowns out every thing else. As with any behavior it begins for a reason but once it becomes habit the behavior may no longer have relevancy to a new situation. We must find a way to change the habit.

Using the catching techniques outlined above you should see a lot of the screaming disappear. However if your animal still screams as you proceed to the halter you may find it helpful to gently but firmly close the mouth. Be sure if you do try closing the mouth that you use your thumb up very high on the bridge of the nose, close to the eye. (see following page) In this way you will not compromise the animals airway. Once the animal has settled down a bit, gradually loosen the pressure and see what happens. Speak soothingly as you work. Closing the mouth will stop the screaming enough to allow your camelid to realize that you aren't hurting her. Don't expect this technique to work if you are doing something unpleasant - however it still may help during a rectal exam or other unpleasant procedure to close the mouth periodically.

**KUSHING:** Perhaps the most frustrating and difficult problem import to deal with is the one who refuses to remain standing. These animals will kush at the proverbial drop of a hat. The catching advice above may help with this problem as well... but how in the world do you get them to lead when they drop like a pole axed mule every time you ask them to take a step?

The key to solving this problem is to change the picture that your camelid sees. In this case the KUSH button is a human within six feet and a little constant pressure on the head. BOOM down we go. In order to change this picture for your camelid, use a much longer lead. I like a lead about 17-20 feet long and make sure to use the whole thing. Practice initial leading sessions in a small paddock ideally an aisle way that is

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longer than it is wide. (see above) This helps you avoid the human within six feet down I go button. As your import realizes that it is possible to remain standing with a lead rope on you can gradually move closer and lead at a more convenient distance. **MAKE ABSOLUTELY** sure that the halter you are using fits. Most camelid halters (particularly alpaca halters) are prone to slip down the nose bone. Tighten the crown piece of the halter more than you would normally even at the risk of feeling it might be a bit too snug. The halter should fit right up by the eye. ( see right). This is the safest place and your camelid knows it. If your llama or alpaca feels like the halter is going to slip this will also push the KUSH button. If you have one, use a halter with rings on the nose band and attach the lead to the side instead of under the chin. Pressure under the chin raising the nose and dropping the back and encourages resistance... you've got it, it pushes the kush button. Leading from the side ring feels different and different is good.



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The second half of the answer is to use **VERY LIGHT NON CONSTANT** signals on the lead. Pretend you have balloons under your arms and eggs in your hands. If your camelid does kush resist the urge to pull on his or her head. Make sure you are using the full length of the the lead and put total slack in the lead rope. Don't stare. Stand at an angle to the animal not directly in front and count to thirty potatoes! That's right one potato, two potatoes, three potatoes, it will take all of a whole minute and I bet that your alpaca will be up before you get to fifteen. Your import has been rushed and dragged and pushed and pulled you are not going to fix this problem with more of the same. Have some patience. A minute is not really very long.

As you work with your imports remember: **TRUE INSANITY IS DOING THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AND EXPECTING TO GET DIFFERENT RESULTS.**

If you keep pushing the buttons you will keep getting the behaviors that accompany them. Time spent with these animals is not a waste of time and will benefit both you and your animal. Working this way with your difficult camelid will make you a better handler and trainer and your efforts will change the mind of a troubled animal.

**CO**

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*Marty McGee Bennett brings a variety of experience and qualifications to her work with camelids, including a B.S. degree in Animal Behavior from the University of Georgia. In the years that Marty lived with llamas she also worked as a professional fiber artist, spinning, knitting and weaving primarily camelid fiber. After meeting Linda Tellington-Jones and learning of her TTEAM approach to handling animals in 1987, Marty turned her attention full-time to training and handling camelids. Marty has conducted hundreds of clinics in North America and around the world including numerous trips to Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Her clinics, books and videos have helped thousands of llama and alpaca owners more fully understand, appreciate and enjoy this magical animal. Her latest book "The Camelid Companion" is now an indispensable textbook for training and handling. Marty and her husband Brad, their dog Rocky and cat Toonces have recently sold their house in Santa Fe New Mexico.*

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