

When To Hold 'Em and When Best To Fold 'Em

By Cathy Spalding

Spitting would seem to be among the higher levels of aggression exhibited within the normal alpaca and llama behavioral range. Humans often misunderstand or altogether miss the behaviors leading up to a true stomach contents spit. An alpaca or llama can easily manipulate our human fear of receiving spit by simply snapping ears back and very slightly raising the nose. "Oh no... they are going to spit!" As if by magnetic repulsion, we move back hoping for the moment to pass.

Spit is not something to be given – nor received lightly. It is serious business. The alpaca or llama who would spit does not seem to enjoy the doing of it any more than those on the receiving end. Animals not directly involved in the exchange will tend to avoid anything with spit on it and some might even hang their own lower lip. It is as nasty to the alpacas and llamas as it appears to be for humans.

After a good stomach contents spit, an alpaca or llama will open their mouth to "air out." This stance is commonly called "bad mouthing." They appear miserable with bits of greenish stomach contents dripping from their mouth. The lower lip hangs loosely and the ears are usually hanging at half-mast. Nostrils can flare and there may be mouth and/or irregular breathing. While the lower lip hangs limply downward, the eyes may appear somewhat dull and distant showing some disconnect with their surroundings. There are often signs of tension and tightening in the facial muscles with a skin wrinkle appearing directly below the eye. In this offensive and rather disgusting state, they are normally left quite to themselves by the rest of the herd.

It is not unusual to see an alpaca or llama that has just hurled a good stomach

contents spit wander about his environment looking for anything that might help rid their mouth of this disdainful mess. In search of a "breath mint," they may chew on the bark of a tree or wooden fence rail, leaves, sticks or head directly for any available fir bough. Some have even been seen picking up and mouthing rocks. In this state, it is not typical that they will seek out their usual hay or grain or even drink water.

There are different levels of spit. Alpacas and llamas may spit out a large volume of air complete with saliva. Spit may be composed of whatever was in the mouth at the time of the incident such as grass, hay, grain or cud. These spits can be somewhat spontaneous in the midst of an argument or in the form of making a statement. These spits will also happen with little to no warning.

The highest level of spit aggression—serious and vile—is the stomach contents spit. The contents of this spit are actually called up from the stomach. Alpacas and llamas normally go through a series of behavioral warnings prior to actually spitting stomach contents. Truth be, they hope to avoid giving this type of spit as much as any recipient would hope to avoid receiving it. The ears snap back, the nose rises and if the "offender" does not respond appropriately, the nose goes higher and the ears move to the pinned position. If the "offender" still does not respond appropriately, you will see a significant lump travel upward along the neck. Sometimes that goopy lump is halted and held in the mouth for just one more warning. Often, however, it is not halted and the lump is forcefully spewed forth in the

direction of the "offender."

Alpacas and llamas are unable to retrieve and spit fresh stomach contents in one continuous action unless the nose is raised high which in turn allows the ears to be pinned back (cued) nearly in line with the neck. This physical posturing effectively diminishes any dramatic curves—particularly at the throat—thus facilitating a fairly straight path from the stomach, up the esophagus and out the mouth. Thinking of this physical positioning in human terms, if we were about to regurgitate and did not stretch out our neck, what would happen?



The photo at left captures just how miserable an alpaca can feel immediately following a stomach contents spit. Llamas feel just as miserable. The lower lip is drooping, the ears hang at half-mast and the nostrils are somewhat flared. Notice the look in the eye and the sagging eyelids. There is an appearance of disconnect to the surroundings as this alpaca seems to focus on how she is feeling at the moment.



In the following photos, a male alpaca has chosen a leaf as a sort of "breath mint" after a stomach contents spit. In the first photo, he has just secured the leaf. He still looks miserable. His lower lip is drooping, his nostrils are flared, his ears hang at half-mast and his eyes are dulled with eyelids sagging. He appears a bit withdrawn and disconnected from his surroundings.



In the second photo of this same alpaca a short time later, notice that he is beginning to perk up. Still in recovery, he continues to hold the leaf in his mouth. However, he is feeling much better. His lower lip is beginning to return to a more proper positioning and his ears

have come forward. His nostrils do not appear flared. His eyes and overall body stance now appear more interested and connected with his surroundings.

We can learn a great deal by closely observing a potentially serious stomach contents spit situation with our animals.



The white alpaca is quite serious in her statements to the fawn alpaca. So serious in fact, that she would appear just moments from backing it up with a hearty spit of stomach contents. Notice her body language and the combination of cues coming together for this expression of anger or upset. The neck is outstretched, the nose is up and the ears are nearly pinned. While not looking straight on at her opponent, she is looking more directly than the recipient. She is not quite yet lined up physically in a balanced body position for a good stomach contents spit. She is, however, surely warning that it is a definite possibility.

Notice the recipient of her aggression. She is well aware of the situation but for the moment has decided to lower her head and look away. Her eyes are drooped and she shows signs of muscle tension in her face. Her body is out of balance. Her combined behavioral stances come together to give her a softer and more subordinate look.

Moments later, the situation has escalated. The white alpaca has shifted herself to a near front on position and balanced herself fairly squarely on all fours. She has brought her neck up, pinning her ears and straightening her esophagus. She has not yet spit but is at the ready needing only to perhaps lift her nose slightly higher. It would appear the recipient would still

hope to avoid an all out confrontation. While moving closer into a defensive spit position by raising her nose, she remains off balance. In fact, she has not even moved her feet. While she has raised her nose, her neck remains lowered in a more submissive position and she does not make eye contact with



her aggressor. Even so, she has escalated and lost some of her softer, more subordinate look. While certainly aware of the situation, the other alpacas are not getting involved.

It is interesting to consider the so often heard advice: "Don't look them in the eye." Alpacas and llamas look at one another constantly. We look at them, they look back, nothing happens. In understanding alpaca and llama behavior, perhaps we can take our cue for the occasion when it is likely not appropriate for us to look them in the eye. The recipient in this potential spit match is surely providing the cues for us. When an alpaca or llama is moving into a stomach contents spit posturing, it seems wise to soften our body, perhaps turn sideways to them and, in this particular instance it seems clear... "Don't look them in the eye!"

CQ

About the Author

Cathy Spalding and her family live in Olympia, WA where they enjoy their herd of 18 llamas and alpacas. With over 20 years experience, Cathy has a wealth of expertise in camelid behavior and training. She has written numerous articles, produced publications including the camelid behavioral textbook on CD-ROM, "Llama Talk" and "Alpaca Talk."