

High Country Alpaca Ranch & Mercantile

ALPACA FACTS

HISTORY:

- Members of the camelid family that includes llamas, guanacos, and vicunas from South America, and the Bactrian and Dromedary camels from Asia and Africa.
- Originated on the plains of North America about 10 million years ago; migrated to South America about 2.5 million years ago.
- Were considered a prized possession by the ancient Incas because of the quality of alpaca fleece, which was spun and woven into garments – referred to as “The Fiber of the Gods”.
- In the 17th century, Spanish conquistadors killed a large part of both the Incan and alpaca populations, forcing them to the high mountain plains known as the Altiplano.
- In 1984, a small group of importers brought the first of a carefully selected herd of highest quality alpacas into the United States and Canada.
- Peru, Bolivia, and Chile are still home to the largest percentage of alpacas in the world.
- Alpacas are currently used for breeding stock, fiber, pets, therapy, meat, and investments.

TYPES OF ALPACAS:

- Huacaya: The most common – approximately 90% of registered alpacas in the United States. Fleece has round and soft appearance is crimped, and dense.
- Suri: Have long dreadlocks without crimp in it, creating a layered appearance.

PHYSICAL TRAITS:

- Life span: About 18-20 years, with a few living up to 30 years of age
- Average adult height: 3 feet at the shoulder and 4.5 feet at the head
- Average adult weight: 100-190 pounds
- Feet: Toenails are hard; bottom of the foot is a soft pad with a leather-like consistency.
- Mouth: Six bottom teeth in the front; top is a hard gum pad; molars in the back.

NUTRITION:

- Ruminants with three compartment stomachs; chew their cud like cattle and sheep.
- Eat grass hays with occasional supplemental feeds, vitamins, and minerals.

HEALTH:

- Hardy and generally disease resistant. Require some dental and toenail trimming.
- Shorn every 12 to 18 months to harvest fleece, and for health and management purposes.

FIBER (FLEECE):

- Fiber is very fine, with very warm insulative properties. Called the “no-itch” fiber because it does not contain lanolin, and is almost free of guard hair.
- Stronger and more resilient than sheep’s wool.
- There are 22 fiber colors that range from a true non fading black to brilliant white with roans, pintos, browns, reds, fawns, rose grays, charcoal grays, and others.
- Average production is about 4 lbs. of fiber per year per adult alpaca.

PERSONALITY:

- Very alert, gentle, social and curious.
- Need the companionship of other camelids, and will huddle together or move en masse when frightened or wary.
- Occasionally spit at each other when they are competing for food or trying to establish their pecking order.
- Express themselves with a complex set of sounds, predominately a soft hum or whine; and with body language, such as neck posturing, ear and tail positioning, and head tilt.
- Have excellent eyesight and hearing, and will alert the herd with a staccato alarm call of perceived danger.
- Intelligent and easy to train. With repetition, will pick up and retain skills such as accepting a halter, being led, kushing (sitting down), and loading in and out of a vehicle.

REPRODUCTION:

- Females are first bred at 14-20 months of age; are induced ovulators, and can be bred any time of the year.
- Average gestation is 335 days; produces a single baby (cria); usually delivered from a standing position during daylight hours. Twinning is extremely rare and rarely compatible with life.
- Crias are normally up and nursing within 90 minutes. Weigh 10-20 pounds at birth; weaned at approximately 6 months.
- Male alpacas reach sexual maturity at about 2 1/2 years of age. Their reproductive lifespan is from 4 to 16 years of age; Prime years are from 5-10 years old.

MANURE MANAGEMENT:

- A herd of alpacas consolidates its feces (beans) in designated spots in the pasture, controlling the spread of parasites, and making it easy to collect and compost for fertilizer.
- Alpaca feces are one of the richest organic fertilizers and do not have to be composted before use. It can be spread throughout property to break down and decompose over time or made into a 'tea' to be used to fertilize house plants.

PREDATOR SECURITY:

- Alpacas seldom challenge a fence. Many alpaca breeders use a no-climb fence 4 or 5 feet tall. Fences serve more to keep predators out than to keep the alpacas in.
- Coyotes, fox, wolves, mountain lions, bear and domestic dogs can be a threat to these animals and must be prevented from entering the premises.
- Llamas and Livestock Guardian Dogs such as Great Pyrenees, Anatolian Shepherds, Akbash and Maremma are utilized to protect the pastures.