



Camelid Cousins: The Llama

In a new series of articles, Paul Rose dispels a few myths and introduces us to the pleasures and versatility of the alpaca's cousin, the llama.

In July 1858 a gentleman by the name of Benjamin Whitehead Gee imported into England what was probably the country's very first group of camelids. According to the Illustrated London News of the time, a group of llamas "started from Peru overland to Guacil, thence to Panama across the Isthmus to Aspinwall and travelled on foot nearly 4000 miles...." They were then transported by ship from New York to Glasgow and were walked down to Acton near London. The ILN reported that "The whole of this flock, even to a lamb five months old, are broken to halter and are very docile and tractable; their countenances exhibit marked expressions of intelligence, the eyes are large and bright..."

This import from Peru was most likely the foundation herd for all the llamas found in the UK for the next one and a quarter centuries. For in the early twentieth century import into the UK from South America was prohibited because of that continent's disease status – a ban that lasted until the 1990's.

Mr Gee's herd almost certainly consisted entirely of "Ccara", short-woolled, llamas. Being the first and for a long time the only type of llamas seen in Europe, these later became known by the misnomer "Classic" llamas. In South America, however, it is another type, the Tampuli or "woolly" llama, which predominates the llama population.

The Ccara can be subdivided into two groups: the Ccara ccara and the Ccara curaca, both identified by closely cropped hair on the head and legs and short dense fibre on the neck. The C.ccara has a short coat over its body and the C.curaca, a medium coat.

The Tampuli also subdivides into two groups, the tapada with a very heavy coat and the lanuda which is not only heavily woolled but is characterised by fringes of fibre on the head and ears and thick wool on the legs, often down to the feet.

Ccaras tend to be larger than Tampulis, for whilst both types were historically used as "beasts of burden", and still are to some degree, there was a tendency to breed the ccara for size and its packing capabilities, whilst the heavy coat of the tampuli offered the opportunity for greater fibre production.

In South America the average height of the llama at the withers is circa 38", some two to six inches smaller than the ccaras found in North America and Europe where diet and selective breeding has tended to produce the larger animal.

With the differing types, variation in size and wool covering, and their "very docile and tractable" nature, not to mention their countenances that "exhibit marked

expressions of intelligence”, the llama offers an animal of remarkable versatility and opportunity; and as demonstrated by that perilous journey of 1858, of extraordinary adaptability...

Llama fibre production

Just as alpacas were domesticated from the vicuna many thousands of years ago, so the llama is the domesticated descendant of the vicuna's larger cousin, the guanaco. Although the guanaco's fibre is not quite so fine as that of the vicuna, it nevertheless boasts an exceptional coat ranging 14-18 microns. And just as in the process of domestication, alpaca fibre lost a little quality to the gain of quantity, so it has been with the llama whose fibre nevertheless ranges a very commendable micron count from the low twenties to the mid thirties.

Llamas are also characterised by having an outer coat of coarse guard hair. Whilst this needs to be separated for knitwear, it is excellent for making anything from lead ropes to wall hangings...

In Bolivia approximately one million llamas are farmed for their fibre and in Peru the best fibre of both the Llama and Alpaca is classified as alpaca: the “Alpaca Symbol” being given equally to llama garments where the micron count is 28 or below.

Llama flock guards

Notwithstanding their easy-going nature, llamas are proven to be extremely effective “flock guardians”, keeping predators such as foxes and uncontrolled dogs from attacking lambs etc. A study by Iowa State University, which monitored this use on a large number of U.S farms, reported a drop in predatory losses from an average of 21% to 7% and half of the farmers reported losses down to 0%. The llama needs no training for the role of guardian but does need to be appropriately selected. A number of alpaca farms have been introducing llama guardians too, following attacks on alpacas by marauding dogs.

Llama trekking

Llamas have long been described as “beasts of burden”. Carrying silver from the mines, goods to market and, indeed, all the worldly possessions of their owners, have long been important roles for llamas in South America. In North America and Europe, llama trekking is becoming an increasingly popular touristic enterprise. The llamas will carry anything from a day's picnic to all the equipment needed for a long camping sojourn; and all the while the clients enjoy the company of their laden llamas whilst unencumbered themselves.

Llamas as field pets

Perhaps the most popular application of llamas outside of South America is as field pets or companion animals. Llama husbandry is very undemanding - virtually identical to that of the alpaca but for the fact they need not be sheared as their fibre stops growing after a couple of years unless sheared again.

A well-bred llama should have a calm and gentle nature with a natural propensity to be trained to the halter. Temperament being all-important, size should not be an issue in handling them. They enjoy being taken for walks and can be taught to pull carts and give children's rides - in South America they are often ridden by adults... as we shall reveal in greater detail in a later article!