



What About Suri?

*By way of introducing a closer look at the suri **Nick Harrington Smith** dispels some myths and assures those of us who do not own suri that we really are missing something special.*

When you first meet someone and mention alpacas it is still something of a surprise if they know what an alpaca is; even if they do, the response is usually oh!, like a “long necked” sheep, which is of course the Huacaya they recognise. Mention a Suri and often you just get a blank look. Now this really shouldn't come as a surprise, given that in the main the promotion of alpacas centres around Huacaya. However to keep the amount of promotional effort in perspective it is thought that the Suri represents less than 10% of the world's total population of alpacas. So, given all that, why would anyone consider the Suri as an option when setting up an alpaca enterprise, especially when you hear all sorts of tales about how difficult they are to keep. It is, amongst other things, a few of these more basic prejudices that I am going to try and clarify, having had considerable experience in both breeding and handling Suri alpacas.

One of the most oft said things is that the Suri needs more mollycoddling because it doesn't have as much fleece and the back-line is often more exposed. Whilst this is a natural assumption, it is fortunately not true. In my experience, whilst the Suri can look slightly frailer because of this lack of a voluminous fleece, it does in fact have a tendency to carry more muscle than a Huacaya. In farming parlance they tend to be good “doers” so in practice if you do need to be more careful, it is **not** to overfeed.

It is also said that the Suri appears to suffer easily from rain scald along the top line. Whilst I have seen rain scald in a few animals this condition is, in our experience, confused with the same problems that cause hair loss in the Huacaya, which are more often than not mite related. We have found that if you treat for hair loss you often cure the so called “rain scald”. We do tend to help the healing process by applying a dairy cow product in the form of udder cream to the scabby area, the one we find most effective has Japanese Spearmint Oil as a constituent. I think the main difference between the Suri and the Huacaya is that it is easier to spot the problem on a Suri because of the more visible top-line.

Now for the fun comment, “Suris are bad tempered, bad mannered and difficult to handle”. It is my experience that relative to the numbers on farm, we have no more bad tempered Suris than Huacaya. It is fair to say that the Suri is more “free spirited” and that it can take a little more time to train because, as I mentioned earlier they tend to carry more muscle and as a result are stronger. That said they tend to have more self confidence, so once they have got over initial reluctance on the halter, they progress quickly and really do show themselves well. They are not bad tempered or bad mannered, some of the most amusing and affectionate alpacas we have on the farm are Suris.

I have heard people say Suris are ugly. It is true that the poorer quality animals do to a certain extent lose their looks, but then so do we humans as we get older. The offset with the Suri is the cria, when you look at Suri cria in the field there is nothing more beautiful, and I will not brook any argument here.

Having hopefully dispelled some of the more damaging misconceptions about Suris I would like to focus strongly on the numerous positive attributes they have. The most striking

thing about Suris is the way they look, even at first glance they have a regal majesty about them. Their “free spirited” nature gives a certain arrogance to the manner in which they hold themselves in the paddock and in the way they observe life in general. When you look at a Suri you can immediately see more of the phenotype because it’s not hidden by masses of fleece.

Of course a big part of the look is their fleece and this is at its most impressive when the alpaca walks. A really good Suri will have a free flowing fleece with each lock independently draping the animal. When the animal moves the fleece will be like rippling water. This independence of lock should be seen up the neck and into the bonnet, with the really good animals even having locks “dripping” from the chin. Now, it used to be that the type of lock was considered paramount in the show ring. This led to a drive to breed a really fine pencil lock. Unfortunately this also led to a lack of density so there are now equal values placed on differing lock types, so do not think that only fine pencil locks are good. Density is vital as this ensures a good cutting weight of fleece.

Another major attribute sought, but not always found, in the Suri is lustre, again with really good Suris this will strike you immediately upon seeing the animal. I was fortunate enough to be in the paddock with a group of Suri weanlings the other day with the sun shining on them. The sight was magnificent with the fleece glistening even from a distance. Of course this lustre is not just seen externally, it should be seen right down to the skin once you open the fleece itself.

It is for the fleece that Suris are primarily bred. However, because of the relatively small number of animals, there is a scarcity of fleece. For those that have not seen processed Suri fibre it has to be seen to be believed. If you venture into a shop in Arequipa and see the finished Suri product, all of those attributes mentioned above will have come through into that product. A few years ago Alan Glover of Alborada Alpacas processed a small amount of Suri fibre for me. When the resultant yarn was knitted up the small swatch displayed all the qualities we could have wished for. Indeed after one day at a show, where visitors handled the swatch, Alex put a label on naming it WOW! Such was the response of the public.

So, we have a beautiful animal, with relatively rare fibre to die for who has beautiful cria. What more could you want? Okay, an economic argument. If one looks at the Suri market elsewhere in the world you will see that they fetch prices far in advance of the same quality Huacaya. Whilst that is not the case in the UK yet, we are seeing more interest in the Suri with a number of breeders only having Suri. In addition, we have just sold some females and males to breeders on the Continent so I believe the future is bright.

Of course you may have worked out that I am a “bit” of a Suri fan, so could be just a little biased. There is no doubt that I am never happier than when I am judging Suri. After all, with the Suri more often than not what you see at first glance is what you get. Oh that all alpacas were so genuine.