



## Camelid Cousins: Flock Guard

There have been a number of cases of attacks on alpacas by dogs in the past couple of years, so it is of considerable interest to learn that if you put a llama in with your alpacas, he can add a very welcome deterrent effect...**Paul Rose** tells all.

For the background story we need to turn to the United States where farmers have been using llamas successfully and extensively to guard their livestock for more than two decades. In the 1980s predation in the U.S by wild dogs, coyotes and even larger beasts, was causing a staggering annual stock loss valued at more than \$83 million. More than 5% of the total sheep population was being lost whilst lamb losses averaged 9%. Such statistics persuaded Iowa State University Veterinary department to carry out a study of the new and growing trend among farmers to use llamas as flock guards.

I.S.U published its first report in 1993. More than two hundred flocks of sheep were studied; chosen because they had been suffering exceptionally high predatory losses. Farmers taking part in the survey reported that since the introduction of a llama to their farm, predation dropped from an average of 21% to 7%. Half of the farmers reported losses down to zero.

These results are impressive by any standards, but especially given the size and nature of the terrain that the llamas had to cope with and the fact that the farms studied were chosen as being particularly prone to attack. Convert this to the smaller field sizes of the UK and remove the factor of coyotes and bears (yes, llamas were known to deter even the occasional not-so-cuddly bear), and it is easy to see why the keeping of a llama with potentially vulnerable livestock merits serious consideration.

### Ducks & Poultry

Whilst taking part in this survey, farmers told a number of interesting, even remarkable stories. The bond between llama and his charges clearly can be extraordinary. One farmer explained *"the first time we put the llama in he went right over to a sick lamb that was hanging back and pushed it with his nose to the flock..."* And another related... *"He never leaves the flock, staying particularly close to a sick sheep"... "...the lambs would climb on his back..."*

Anecdotally farmers also reported success with their flocks of ducks and poultry. In fact so many successes were

remarked upon as asides, that the University decided it would do a second study; this time to include poultry and goats. This second study confirmed and expanded upon the findings of the first. A further 136 farms were studied where among goat herds 89% success was reported and on poultry farms 92% success was achieved.

### Case History

***The Roseland Llama Farm supplied their first llama as a flock guardian to a large farm in Kent where they had considerable problems with predation by foxes.***

- The previous lambing season they had lost some 35 lambs!
- With the llama in the flock the next season, they did not lose a single one!
- The llama had paid for itself almost immediately.

### So how does it work?

Llama herd behaviour is very similar to alpaca herd behaviour. Within a herd of llamas, it is the natural instinct of the male to stand apart from the grazing females, watching... on guard! Studies suggest that the herdsire will graze for approximately one-third of the time spent grazing by the females. Take a *suitable* llama and put him with other field stock and he will bond with his new charges, transferring on to them his guardian rôle.

Some male alpacas have been shown to be similarly inclined, but the llama has size, weight, and power on his side and the effect on a predator is significant. If a fox or marauding dog attacks any of his charges then the otherwise generally slow, ambling and gentle llama will charge at it with startling speed and energy. Neck

extended, head thrust down, he will hurl himself at the offender and stamp at it furiously.

**“Will my guard llama chase my own dogs or even my children?”** *Correctly chosen, he will live happily with dogs that are carefully introduced to him and be perfectly safe with children.*

Whilst there have been occasionally reports of the predator being killed by the llama, a kill is rare. The nature of the wild predator is such that it will usually be off very sharply when faced with a charging llama and will look for its meal or ‘fun’ elsewhere!

### **Effectiveness**

The llama as livestock guardian, however, does not offer a total panacea (does anything?). Success will partially depend on your set-up. A farm with the animals grazing around lots of buildings would make it hard for the llama to do his job effectively. Poultry clearly need to be free-ranging, as the llama will not thrive or be able to work in intensive small enclosures, or multi-housing set-up.

### **Case History**

*A breeding pair of llamas was supplied as “pets” to someone who also kept a flock of Soay sheep in the same paddock. The llamas were not bought as flock guards, but the owners usually lost one or two lambs to the fox each year... Following the arrival of their llamas, and for the first time ever, they lost no lambs at all to the fox. A stillborn lamb that they would have expected to be taken by the fox was left untouched in the field.*

Management is especially important in using a llama as a flock-guard for alpacas. A gelding male llama will make a sensible precautionary addition to a group of female alpacas and their young, for example, but possibly not if the stud male alpaca is kept in the group too, as this risks aggression between the two males. Where the females are taken to the male alpaca for mating or the male is taken to individual females taken out of their group, this would not be a concern.

### **Choosing your guard llama**

Some years ago large mountain dogs became a popular flock guards in the US. Leaving the dog with the livestock for long periods, however, created its own problems. The dogs, deprived of human company, sometimes became as wild as the predators and were liable to attack anyone passing over the land! They needed extensive training, then re-training and expensive daily feeding. The llama, in contrast, will graze alongside his charges, is of no danger to

people or non-aggressive animals (such as the farm pets), and needs no training.

**“Can I be sure it will work?”** *A great deal of success has been achieved by hundreds of owners but regrettably there is no absolute panacea or guarantee.*

Although the guard llama needs no training as such, selection of a suitable candidate is all-important. He must not be an aggressive animal at all in his normal daily interaction with other animals and humans. The ideal llama for the job will be a male who has lived with other llamas for the first year or so of his life and has been gelded after 18 months, but not later than 24-30 months. If older than this he is less likely to adapt to the role unless he has already been in the role of flock guard elsewhere. Just as with any litter of working puppies some will never make the grade and will be destined to become pets, others may be too enthusiastic...

Your guard llama should have a well-balanced personality, be easily haltered and led, and be perfectly safe with children, pets, farm dogs etc. This needs to be emphasised because one problem that llama breeders have faced is lack of knowledge in the non-camelid farming community - a situation that some less-than-scrupulous sellers have taken advantage of to dump unwanted or unhandleable animals, suggesting that it is their aggression that marks them out as suitable guards. This is quite wrong. Equally, an unwanted elderly pet or retired stud llama, for example, cannot be expected to do the job! So in selecting your guard llama do ensure you get appropriate help in making your selection.

**“Will any llama do the job?”** **No! It is important** *that he has been reared appropriately, comes from a llama herd environment, is carefully selected as having the right temperament and attributes, is gelded at the right time, and is put to work at the right age.*

Your guard llama will ideally be a single gelded male although there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that females or pairs will do the job too. Your guard llama should work for some 10-12 years and once you have him he will add very little to your costs. Like alpacas, llamas are mainly grazers but will probably keep your field hedges nicely

trimmed too. He will certainly make a splendid addition to a group of his camelid cousins.

***Paul Rose***

*Footnote:* As you will by now have realised no study - at least, as far as I am aware - has been done directly on the effectiveness of using llamas as flock guardians with alpacas, but it is a course being adopted by an increasing number of alpaca owners. It makes sense and there is no reason why it should fail where it has succeeded elsewhere. If you have introduced a llama to your alpaca herd, or if you do so in the future, I would be extremely keen to hear from you and learn of your experiences.

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