# Llama Behaviour and Training

## General

Something many llama keepers notice is that compared to many other large animals they are familiar with, llamas are more inquisitive, interactive with humans and trainable. I think most of us also like to think they are more intelligent, but at times I have my doubts like when they cannot work out that the only way to access the feed bucket is to take two strides to right and come through the open gate and instead continue trying to eat through the holes in the stock fencing.

Obviously llamas vary amongst one another in all these traits and there are probably no two llamas with the same experience and/or personality.

Unfortunately, not all llama receive very much in the way of human attention and if not used to it or yet learned to trust, shy away when approached and do not get the chance to shine or show their true potential. Like with so many things, what you get back in return is related to what you put in.

## Habits

There appear to be a number of habits llamas exhibit regardless of type or country.

They run in a rather ungainly way with head down.

They dance when excited such as at feed time and for some reason on a patch of loose soil.

They generally stick together as a herd.

They usually do their business in specific areas of their paddock often simultaneously.

They have a mad half hour before dark when they race around pringing as they go.

They set down for the night close together with their cria beside them.

They hum when grazing and with their cria.

They rarely challenge perimeter fencing without good reason such as starvation, for mating, etc.

They put their ears forward when their attention is attracted and backwards when unsure or unhappy about things.

They look aloof at strangers.

They like high ground where they have all round visibility.

They walk front right forward, left back forward....

## Compatibility

Llamas are generally peaceful animals that get on together well and stay as a herd. Some appear to form very strong bonds with each other and are inseparable so far as is possible. This can be just two, three or four. However, as you would also expect there are some exceptions. Stud males generally do not get on together, especially if there are females nearby. They will most certainly spar for position, chasing each other screaming as they go with a horrible head cracking shrill. I neighbours reside with half a mile they will be coming to warn you or complain that it is scaring their children etc. The difficulty is knowing whether they are liable to hurt each other. I have kept two stud males brought up together, together even after they started to work as studs. However, I have also had a stud who was totally intolerant of any male, castrated or entire, causing considerable damage, despite having his fighting teeth removed. I have known of another breeder have one of her studs kill the other. I have also known two studs live peacefully together and then one day go on the attack. It is a lottery I am afraid and anyone taking the risk must be prepared for the worst. It is like the pet dog that one day decides to kill sheep, some basic instinct seems to kick in.

That said, I appreciate that isolation is not good for any animal and is more likely to hinder than help future sociability. My half-way house is to keep incompatible males in adjoining paddocks where they can see all that is going off without feeling totally isolated.

Irrespective of gender it is important that after quarantine new llamas are slowly introduced into the herd and closely monitored. Accommodating them in adjoining paddocks for a few days to test the water can often be helpful.

### Pecking Order

Llamas always appear to have a pecking order which can change periodically and doesn’t naturally follow gender, size or age. It expresses itself especially at feeding time but also in terms of occupancy of the highest point in the paddock. If there is a mound or steps you will see they wrestle for control and occupancy of it.

## Sexual Behaviours

Llamas generally imitate sexual behaviour in their play from an early age. Young males can start to mount other cria, male and female, and ogle as part of their play from just a few months. Young females also sometimes present themselves in a flertatious manner (cushing with their tales curled back) from a similar age if a male is in the adjoining paddock.

It is said in the literature that male and females llamas are fully matures at 3 years, but males can be fertile and females conceived from around 12 months. However, it should also be appreciated that 1-3 year old llamas may mate but not necessarily produce any offspring until after this age. What matters, if they are fertile, is that they are sufficiently mature to see a healthy pregnancy through the 50 weeks, have sufficient quality milk for the cria and look after them until they are properly weaned. Even a fully mature maiden female can find accepting its cria difficult, not understanding why it wants to crawl under them and feed from its udder. Some take to it straight away as second nature but there can be exceptions. As with many other species, it would appear that pregnancy before maturity appears to be capable of stunting further growth in the mother. This is why most breeders leave mating until the female is at least two and more commonly 3 years of age.

### Mating

When brought together in the same space, it doesn’t usually take long for the male to smell a couple of dung piles, throw his head up and back and then go in pursuit of the female he has decided is open (ovulating). Sometimes they play hard to get and the male chases them for several minutes. Sometimes they are willing participants and readily cush for the male. He doesn’t always get it right and usually gives up his pursuit if the females isn’t interested. Not all llamas are such gentlemen and the female needs to be rescued from the situation. If she happily succumbs to his desires, it is not usually long before other receptive females are queuing alongside the females being mated.

Not all males are ‘impetuous maters’, I had one male who was only ever active in this regard after dark to begin with. I am sure we could all speculate but llamas are animals not humans and I do not intend to try to find a reason.

How long the mating process takes place can vary from a few minutes to an hour. Not all males are as effective at achieving penetration and not all females kush in the best position for him to do so. This means that sometimes there is a lot of adjusting before the actual connection is made.

Most breeders use what is termed the ‘Spit off’ to determine whether conception has taken place and the female become pregnant. This process involved putting the male to the female after a time had elapsed and observing whether she was receptive to him or not. If she readily cushed and allowed him to mate her the likelihood being that she hadn’t already conceived. If she strongly resisted, spitting at him if he tried, it was often a good sign that she was already pregnant. Not all males are accepting of her resistance and try to bully her into surrendering, in which case the female needs rescuing.

The other method is scanning using ultra sound. This requires specialist kit which can be very variable in penetrating throughdepending on its power and properties. It also requires restraining the animal and a person well versed in reading/interpreting the output.

If left in the same paddock the stud will usually stand off the herd until the urge to mate takes his fancy again.

I think most breeders would agree that the best scenario is yard mating. This way there is less excitement amongst the herd as a whole, you can more accurately predict the birthing time and be on hand to help if required.

Occasionally, conceptions fail due to the foetus not passing through the fallopian tubes into the womb and attaching to the placenta in the female. This can be corrected by the vet... but sometimes the tubes are just too small for...

Sometimes the male is infertile for one reason or another, periodically or permanently. Low sperm count, weak sperm, etc.

Miscarriages can occur and can be down to numerous factors, mainly stressors of one form or another

## Birth

When the pregnant female approaches birthing time it is common practice for her to roll on her back frequently to help align the foetus for delivery. During the last few hours, it is common, but of course unusual behaviour, for the expectant mum to keep her own company away from the main herd. However, as soon as any hoofs start to appear, it arouses considerable excitement and she soon finds herself surrounded by every other llama sharing the same paddock. Once the cria hits the ground, just everyone has to have a sniff and get in the way of the mother. Usually, the mother soon starts to let the others know this cria is hers as she snorts them away warning them to keep their distance whilst the cria sits there coming to terms with the new world and summing up the energy to get to its feet and go in search of food. I have known it take no more than ten minutes for the cria to get to its feet and make connection with its mother’s teet. Some can take considerably longer and this can be a very worrying time for the breeder. Sometimes the cria starts to suck on a wrong part of the mother’s anatomy and other times the mum just keeps backing off wondering what the cria is trying to do. If the other llamas keep accidentally knocking the new born cria over and off its feet as they greet it, it is sometimes better to secure their own space by penning them into an area or building.

Once feeding properly, the cria are soon finding their legs and running round the paddock at great speed with mother looking on in consternation.

The placenta or afterbirth is usually discharged between 10 and 30 minutes after the birth and should be removed and suitably disposed of straight away. A health afterbirth is usually self-contained in the sac and bright red. The health of the afterbirth is usually a good sign of the health of the mother and baby. Occasionally, the womb is also discharged with the placenta which is a real cause for concern requiring professional intervention. The vet with usually cleanse it and push it back in, securing it in place with a temporary stich, sometimes with a suppository and/or antibiotic injection as a precautions for infection. In my experience a discharged womb is more common in maidens and large cria. I have found that second time around it doesn’t happen but if it did then I would not breed again from that female.

Other difficulties that can arise are when the foetus remains in the breach position when giving birth. The limited space inside the delivery canal makes it exceptionally difficult for human intervention even by an experienced vet. Professional help is required and must be called on as soon as possible. Sadly, it is not uncommon that should this uncommon situation arise the cria is lost through strangulation, etc.

## Treatment of Cria

How soon to begin interaction with cria would appear debatable in llama circles. Cria naturally seem to be very curious and confident to approach humans as they explore the world around them. Whether this is something to be encouraged or not is questionable and the general opinion in the UK appears to be against it. As yet, I haven’t experienced the so called *Berserk Syndrome* but I have witnessed adult llama who were handled as youngsters behaving perfectly normal for a llama. That is respecting the human’s space and refraining from aggressive behaviour. The worst I have witnessed, first hand, is a llama either broad siding a human blocking their path or running at them and buffeting them from behind. I am led to believe it can be much worse, but I am not entirely sure that this can be put down to excessive handling in the first few months. Many breeders in North America tell me they start to handle and train their cria from an early age and it does not cause any difficulties, mistaken identity, etc. later in life. I have also come across another former breeder in the UK who did similar and swore by the practice.

I appreciate that raising orphaned cria can bring special problems. I know of two successful cases where there was only minimal human intervention (feeding the colostrum), other lactating females nursed them alongside their own. Assuming this isn’t possible or it does not work out, then I remain convinced that there are benefits from keeping human contact to a minimum (ie beyond feeding) until it clearly recognises itself as a llama.

I have always found male cria more confident and interactive than females but you also get the mummy’s boy who never ventures far from his mum or she let him.

Something I have repeatedly noticed is that young biddable males can change in their bidability within a very short space of time after being worked as a stud. I had a male who let me lift his feet to trim his hoofs without any resistance but the first time I tried after he mated he kicked out and pulled on the lead whenever he was taken for a walk if he knew females were somewhere in the vicinity.

How llamas respond to humans is not always indicative of how they relate to other llamas. I have known the most gentle Dr Hyde llama very obliging to their owner turn into a Mr Jekyll llama when freed to run with other llamas, especially amongst males.

## Guard Llamas

It is not unknown for owners sometimes wanting to off load males to offer them as *Guard Llamas*. I have found that llamas, often the dominant male in a h erd, take up a guarding role keeping watch on the surroundings. When they perceive a threat such as a dog they make an alarm call somewhat similar to a honking donkey to warn the other llamas who often congregate around the leader. If the intruders gets too near it is usually he who leads a charge to attack or scare off. I am not sure if that llama is removed another one automatically takes up that role or they have to have it as part of their nature. I am not sure what other traits a potential good Guard Llama portrays. I have heard of llamas not challenging badgers, foxes and the like and some sold as guard llamas not bonding with the sheep or chickens they were meant to guard. They simply kept their own company and stud off the flock.

## Training

First of all, I wish to acknowledge that I have known llamas who without any prior training take to the halter and being led as if second nature. It’s not always been the ones I would have bet my money on either. Temperament very often does pass down the breeding line but as is so often the case with llamas they can surprise you.

How best to train a first reluctant llama also appears to depend, to some extent, on personalities of both llama and trainer. I have witnessed force and progressive desensitisation and familiarisation work. The first method is generally quicker. In the first instance, it does not need to be brutal, just assertive. The llama quickly understands where the power resides and surrenders. Of course, it is most important that the llama is not allowed to hurt itself if it starts to throw itself around. Some might say that this is a rather ruthless method and is more akin to bullying to win control. Whilst I practice a more progressive desensiting and familiarisation approach, I am not totally dismissive of the former one because I have seen it work without any apparent long-term effects going forward, the llama has quickly fallen into being receptive and relaxed. There is plenty of video footage of this method being used in South America by llamas herdsmen and I have witnessed it first hand by professional herdsmen in the US. I guess they just don’t have the time to do it any other way.

The other way is a far more gentle approach building trust and rewarding the llama with something they like. This is a philosophy developed in llamas by Marty McGee and is well documented elsewhere. Similar techniques exist for other species, equine in particular.

Patience is key to this technique. With some llamas it can more time to get them to act appropriately, but my experience has always found it is a problem of communication. The llama just does not understand what it is you want it to do. As soon as it does, you are well away. It just takes time to do it in more incremental steps. As soon as you get even the minutest of correct responses flood the llama with praise. Believe me, they love it and soon cannot do enough to please you. It is as if they now take pride in doing it right. It is at this point that the trainer-llama bond starts to intensify and you no longer want to let that llama go.

Teaching llamas to perform more sophisticated behaviours has been pioneered in the UK by Terry Crowfoot using Skinner’s operant conditioning techniques –response/reward. Hopefully, many readers will have witnessed her remarkable achievements on *You Tube*. If not I strongly recommend you look them up. They just go to show what llamas are capable of.

Terry has also taught one of her llamas to cart. This is something I personally have not yet got round to but love the idea. I have seen many take part in rallies in the US and their trainers have told me that with the right lama they have achieved training it over the weekend. It is something I aim to explore over coming months and plan to buy one of the videos illustrating what to do. Without the experience I have nothing valuable to offer readers yet. Watch this space!.