



# FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

## Handling

### Taking Your Cues from Alpacas and Llamas

#### Alpaca and Llama Training

Alpacas and llamas are keen observers of their environment, and in constant communication in one form or another with each other as well as with their human caretakers. They communicate individually as they feel and see from their own perspective. They communicate together as a group or entire herd. Noted experts have spent considerable time studying the behaviors of the guanaco and vicuna and the possible evolutions of specific communication - observing them wild and untamed in their natural environments in South America.

By contrast, the alpaca and llama have always been subject to human management and have never been wild. There is no knowledge of the existence of a renegade herd turned wild - having somehow separated from human management. Though no expert feels certain of the exact origins of either the alpaca or llama, they are genetically considered to be some combination of their wild cousins, including perhaps even ones that may now be extinct. It is theorized that this long evolution of domestication for the alpaca and llama includes behavioral adaptations as a result of their "forever" human management.

It is relatively easy by comparison to study a group in the wild - in their natural environment - than to study a group within an endless combination of domestic environments. The size, terrain and climate of the environment combined with the unique qualities and styles of their human management can be a vastly different experience from one herd to the next. It would be rare that an alpaca or llama could become a member of any herd based solely on the decisions made by the herd group, much less have control of their wanderings beyond the fenced boundaries of their caretakers domain. We all adapt as best we might to our surroundings - our environment. Few behavioral studies have been conducted for the domesticated alpaca and llama, though certainly much information is drawn from their wild cousins. A good bit of what we know today has also come from our own personal observations.

A general understanding of your particular herd dynamics is very useful as an indicator of the overall general health and well being of your animals. It is important to know your animals as a herd as well as individuals.

- **What are their normal groupings?**
- **Are some close pasture buddies while others may not get along well?**
- **Are some at one feeding station and never at another?**
- **Is anyone a loner?**
- **What is the seeming social hierarchy?**
- **Who would seem to rule the pastures and who might seem to be clinging to that last social rung?**
- **What is the normal activity for the alpaca or llama holding those positions, and what is the normal activity for those occupying the rungs in between?**
- **Who stands guard - are there several?**



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A general knowledge of your particular herd dynamics can lend information - provide a cue - that something may require further investigation.



- Is one who is not a loner suddenly off by themselves?
- Is the herd queen suddenly seen to be weaker receiving spit from much more neutral herd members and backing away?
- Is the entire herd up and about grazing in the morning sun while one remains kushed in ashelter?
- Even more subtle, is the entire herd grazing and only one is kushed - kushed right there amidst the group?



This herd is grazing with only one llama kushed. It is a gorgeous day and all seems right with the world. Seeing this positioning from a distance, it is easy to assume that she is simply resting... enjoying the sun. She's right there with the group, but simply kushed. Though her neck in the photo is a bit forward, it would seem her facial expressions appear normal. Her ears are up and alert and she appears interested in her surroundings. The cue in this instance, however, is that she would be kushed at all when the entirety of the herd is up and grazing. Acting upon this subtle cue to investigate further, we go out to the field and get her to rise. Taking a closer look will help us determine whether she is fine or whether there might be a potential problem.



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Once up, it is clear that something may not be well with this llama. Her overall body stance is somewhat out of balance and hunched. Her eyes are not as bright and alert as we had first thought.

Her ears are held at half-mast and she does not hold her neck upright. Her facial muscles are tense and she seems to keep her head lower than normal. Then she begins to graze.



Or does she? It appears she would like to, but is simply nosing the ground. Her face remains tense pulling back her lower lip somewhat.

Her eyes are dull and partially closed. This llama is not feeling well.

An often-repeated phrase throughout both the alpaca and llama community is: "They are so stoic. Once they show that they are ill, they are really ill." Gaining a better understanding of their many subtle behavioral cues adds an important dimension to our skills as herd managers and trainers. The above behavior (only one kushed while the rest are grazing) was our cue to simply explore further. Does what we see or think we see mean that it is? Perhaps... and then again, perhaps not.

Behavioral cues can mean different things at different times though they should always give us cause to pause and consider the possibilities. It is important to consider the positioning and surrounding circumstances in which particular cues are noted. At one time, a combination of cues can lead us to explore health issues. Exhibited in a different context, many of those same cues can mean something else entirely. Know your herd as a group and as individuals. What is normal behavior for one may be an indicator to explore further in another.



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