



## FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

### Handling

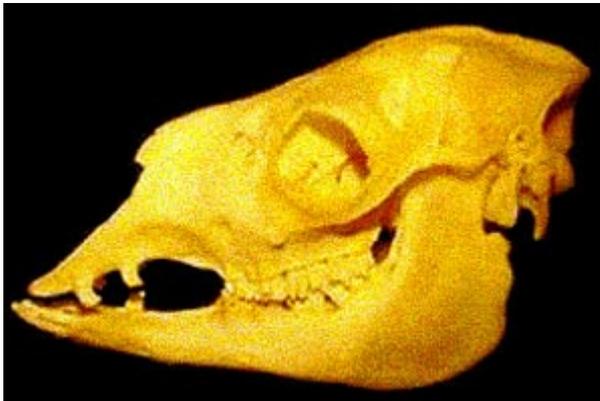
#### Heads and Halters

##### Alpaca and Llama Training

Much has been written, discussed, designed and manufactured when it comes to "head gear" for llamas and alpacas. As long as one can get the nose through and buckle it about the crown, it should work... or does it? A llama or alpaca halter is one of the most important pieces of equipment we will ever consistently use with our animals. A proper fit is absolutely crucial to safety, comfort and performance.

To see just how this is so, it is important to understand the physical dynamics involved. Llamas and alpacas are obligate nasal breathers. This means they are obligated to breathe primarily through their nose. The noseband of the halter must fit safely and comfortably around the face between the eyes and the point at which the nose bone dramatically declines. As can be seen from the photo of the skull of an adult male llama below, this is not a very wide distance. Cartilage begins where the bone ends and the nose becomes softer and more easily compressed on its way towards the lips.

Imagine this llama in full fleece with big brown eyes. Imagine how long and firm the length of his nose would appear. It is, however, in appearance only.



The safe, comfortable and optimum performance area of actual bone for the placement of a halter is rather narrow. What happens when the halter is not sitting on the firm, immobile bone surface and there is a pull on the lead rope? It compresses the cartilage and the further down the nose a noseband sits, the more severe the possible compression.

This compression restricts air flow (hence the ability to breathe) as it begins to flatten the passageways through the nose and in extreme cases, has been known to suffocate a llama or alpaca to death. Proper halter fit can literally mean the difference in life and death.



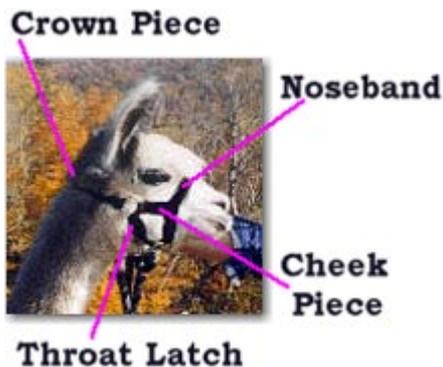
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Look at the bone structure of this male llama from another angle. Looking down from the top we can clearly see that very narrow area of solid bone.

With only this small area of bone for safe and proper fit, how is it likely that we could ever purchase a halter without bringing along our llamas and alpacas for sizing? And, just as no two humans have precisely the same face shape and size, neither do our animals.

All halters should have a noseband, cheek pieces, throat latch and crown piece though I have seen some that were missing one or more of these elements.



Understanding the functional details of each piece of the halter is equally important. The longer the cheek pieces, the further down the nose the noseband must sit or the further down the neck must sit the crown piece - sometimes, both.

The throat latch serves to stabilize the bottom of the noseband as well as assist in minimizing any shift from side to side. It is most useful to have a longer crown piece with a number of holes available for optimum adjustment.

There are a wide variety of llama and alpaca halters available. The three most common are (1) the fixed noseband (solid circle noseband), (2) the X-style and (3) the adjustable noseband.

The fixed noseband halter is the most unlikely of the three to ever fit properly. Remember the toy "Rings on a Cone"? The rings are of varying sizes with each ring able to move only so far down the cone in accordance with its inner circumference. So it is with the fixed noseband halter. It will only move as far up the nose as its inner circumference will allow. Like a ring on the cone, it is not possible to adjust it any further than it will go.

The X-style halter really has no fixed noseband to speak of... there is no way to stabilize and maintain a proper adjustment. To expand the noseband, slack must be taken from the area of the throat latch forcing both the cheek pieces and the crown piece downward. To make it smaller, a great deal of slack must be taken up in the crown piece crimping the cheek pieces. With any pressure, the ring to which the lead is attached is free to move from side to side along what would be a combination of the noseband and throat latch, which often has the effect of changing the size of the "noseband" from side to side.

The only halters that can truly be adjusted to fit nearly every llama and alpaca face are those with an adjustable noseband. It then follows that a halter with an adjustable noseband



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providing a large range of options for proper fit would also be a safe, non-distracting and comfortable choice. Keep in mind - any halter has the potential for disaster if not properly adjusted.

We have considered safety. How does a properly fit halter - a safe halter - affect comfort and behavior? It would seem reasonable that an ill-fitting halter would be uncomfortable as well as distracting. Consider the distraction within ourselves should our pants be too tight or heaven forbid, our underwear keeps "riding up"! It is not only uncomfortable but it interrupts our focus. The above "human" distractions are certainly not life threatening but what if we felt they could be? What if those things were actually affecting our ability to breathe easily? What if we just feared they could? How would that affect our behavior, our comfort, concentration and focus... our overall and immediate emotional stability?

In my many years of working with difficult llamas and alpacas, I have witnessed some rather amazing attitudes expressed behaviorally regarding their halters. One of the most profound was a llama who was impossible to handle while haltered. She flipped between violent movements and a frozen stance. Her eyes were held extremely wide open darting here and there in what could only be described as panicked fear. She wore a red, fixed noseband halter, which sat beyond the bone on the soft cartilage of her nose. It was causing her great distress. Upon removing her halter, I unconsciously began to fit her with a red adjustable noseband halter. She would have no part of it bucking wildly in her attempts to stay as far from that "thing" as she could. Hmm... I wondered about the color. The red one she had worn before had clearly caused her distress. We put away the red halter and tried once again with a black one. Piece of cake! She did not particularly mind wearing a halter just as long as it fit properly and was not red!

Considerable instruction has been given over the years on ways in which to fit a halter safely, functionally and with comfort to the face of a specific llama or alpaca. In over 15 years of haltering llamas and alpacas (not only my own but 100's of others), I have experienced the explanations of a wide variety of "how to" methods. With awareness, properly fitting a halter for an alpaca or llama is fairly simple. Assuming you are using a halter with an adjustable noseband, simply set the size of the noseband at an adjustment much larger than you think is appropriate. Placing the halter on your animal, fasten the crown piece at its proper position - tight enough to be very secure in its placement, but not uncomfortably tight. Go back to the noseband and adjust the size to fit the shape of your particular alpaca or llama face leaving enough room for eating, chewing cud and other various needs/functions. Should the noseband be left too large, it is possible for it to bend forward at the top to an unsafe position. Securely and properly placed, the crown piece will hold the noseband in position.

You can test your adjustments in three ways. The crown piece should be secure and not easily moved up and down. Checking the noseband, place your hand on each side and check forward movement. Will it slip forward? If so, tighten the crown piece. By bending the halter forward will the top of the noseband move off the bone? If so, take up some slack in the noseband. It is always wise, especially with particularly woolly animals to check the crown piece adjustment after about 10 minutes. It is possible for the halter to settle into the wool and become loose. Should this happen, simply tighten the crown piece another notch to account for the slack created as it settled into the fiber.

It is not my intention to endorse or promote any specific halter or vendor. My intention is to provide as much information as possible regarding halters. By taking the time to consider the many aspects which go into choosing a halter, it becomes possible to make our choice based on safety, comfort and performance - as well as for a specific color!



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