

Chapter 11

Cria Songs

In my opinion, alpaca crias—like human infants—are not particularly attractive right after birth. They’re soaking wet from amniotic fluids, and their fiber is tightly plastered to their skinny bodies. Bony and gawky looking, a newborn alpaca usually weighs around fifteen pounds. At both ends of the spectrum, there are tiny survivors of ten pounds or less and strapping whoppers of twenty-five pounds. I hope never to see one in the latter category on our farm. High birth weights are not desirable in any livestock species due to an increased chance of dystocia.

Within twenty-four hours, the homely, leggy newcomer morphs into an adorable, fluffy creature. Alpaca crias are doubtless among the most endearing of all baby animals. The charm and just plain cuteness of a little alpaca are hard to resist. I experienced an example of this early on during our days as alpaca breeders.

Building a house on our newly-purchased farm took up an enormous amount of David’s and my time. Friends generously fostered the two youngest of our Whippets—Stormy and a little bitch named Hannah—for almost an entire year. They raced and coursed them and gave the little dogs the attention they craved. My friend Marie felt keen disappointment that our travels with Whippets had come to an end. Several times she used the term “stupid alpacas” to describe the animals that fueled my new passion.

Our second cria, Mariah, and the first to be born on Stormwind Farm, was a week old when Marie paid us a visit. After we finished lunch, I cajoled, “Come on, let’s go see the alpacas.”

Marie reluctantly agreed. As we left the porch, the animals were nowhere to be seen. We approached the barn from the dog yard and entered it through the service door.

“Where are they?” Marie asked with little enthusiasm.

“Go out the barn door, they’re probably behind the barn in the pasture,” I said as I encouraged her to walk ahead.

Following along, I paused to check the water bucket. Suddenly, I heard, “Ooooh—” followed by a long silence. When I investigated, I found Marie and Mariah staring at each other. Harley hovered nearby, visibly nervous about the stranger checking out “his” baby. Breeze kept a wary distance. She wore the haughty expression that she reserves for most humans who visit her home. During the first years of our relationship, I was often the recipient of Breeze’s queenly scrutiny. Apparently, I’ve been judged acceptable because she has not given me the hairy eyeball in a long time.

Marie and Mariah were unaware of Breeze’s disapproval. They remained standing motionless for quite some time, each entranced by the other’s presence. There was no more talk about “stupid alpacas” after their encounter. Marie wasn’t around when it came time to halter train Mariah. I think she would have been surprised to see how quickly alpacas can learn a new skill.

On Stormwind Farm, all crias are initially conditioned to quietly accept being handled and wear a halter. After that, they are also trained to cooperatively walk on a lead. Because of our small breeding program, I can afford to indulge my crias.

Large livestock operations normally do not train their animals to accept a halter and walk on lead. For example, most cattle and sheep are herded into an enclosure and then a chute for

Excerpt from “The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm”
By Ingrid Wood, Copyright 2011

inoculations and other treatments. At the end of their lives, they are herded from feed lots to the designated slaughter area.

Traditionally, the only individuals in a livestock herd to receive much handling and training are animals shown as 4-H projects or breeding stock exhibited in sanctioned shows. I don't know whether alpaca farmers with large herds follow this management model. Those who own small herds like us halter train all their crias, at least the farm owners I am personally familiar with.

Four women have had an impact on how I treat the crias growing up on our farm. Carol Masters was the first to impress on me that alpacas are prey animals and don't respond to humans in ways we have come to expect from fellow predators, our canine companions and friends. Carol's explanations were the foundation for what slowly evolved into a comprehensive program.

The next woman to help shape my philosophy on handling and training was Dr. Temple Grandin. I found her book, *Genetics and the Behavior of Domestic Animals*, when I researched color genetics in mammals. This was years before Dr. Grandin became the famous “rock star” of the livestock industry. She's a remarkable person. In any case, at one point, Dr. Grandin discusses an interesting phenomenon found in rats. First, she explains that “development of emotional reactivity of the nervous system begins during early gestation.” Later, she cites research which showed that handling pregnant rats and stressing them created nervous offspring. The study also showed that briefly handling newborn rat pups helped in developing a calmer temperament.

Of course, alpacas are not rats, but I reasoned that both species have similar physical reactions to fear.

At Stormwind Farm, we handle pregnant females only when necessary and with calm gentleness. Crias are touched briefly after birth and in weekly sessions that last only a few seconds. They are never chased or grabbed roughly. I've placed two catch pens in different areas of the pasture. Alpaca crias are very curious and will often enter a newly opened catch pen to investigate. When a cria does that, I take the opportunity to restrain it lightly for just a few moments. Halter training begins when crias are around six months old.

The last two women who have had a profound effect on how I work with our alpacas are Marty McGee Bennett and Dorothy Hunt. Marty is the founder of *Camelidynamics*, a program based on the philosophy and teachings of Linda Tellington-Jones and her *Tellington TTouch* program. Dorothy Hunt is the first *Camelidynamics* practitioner to be certified by Marty.

The *Camelidynamics* program differentiates between handling and training. When we handle alpacas, we simply expect them to stand quietly while things like inoculations are done to them. Nothing is expected of the alpaca except to stand still. Training involves active participation from an alpaca, such as walking alongside the handler after being haltered. Several management procedures straddle the areas of handling and training. For example, when I trim toenails, the alpaca stands in place but is also expected to cooperate by holding up its foot.

Dorothy, who teaches a *Camelidynamics* workshop on Stormwind Farm each year, has changed the way I handle and train the alpacas as compared to the early days. For example, halter training can be a time of frustration for many owners, an unpleasant chore that must be faced with grim determination. I feel joy and a special, emotional connection with my animals during training.

Very much like human children, no two crias are exactly alike in personality. Their reactions to humans and training differ widely. Two of our crias were amazingly quick to convince that wearing a halter and walking on a lead are fun things to do.

Those two were Riverman and a very nice, little female named Memphis. Riverman, in essence, taught himself. He accepted the halter without showing fear and appeared quite comfortable wearing it for the first time. I stepped a few feet away from him, turned my back, and waited patiently. My posture was relaxed and my breathing calm and steady. This is always my

Excerpt from “The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm”
By Ingrid Wood, Copyright 2011

first, brief lesson with halter and lead. It gives the baby a chance to think and gather its wits before I give further instructions. Most crias don't automatically get the idea that they can walk normally while wearing a halter and with the lead connected to a human. Riverman hesitated for less than a minute. With my back turned to the cria, I sensed rather than saw the little alpaca's first, cautious steps toward me. “That's a good, good boy,” I praised him profusely, and away we went. That was the extent of Riverman's training.

Memphis, whose mother can be so difficult, was just as easy to train. Before I halter a cria for the first time, it is accustomed to being gently restrained with a special catch rope designed by Marty McGee Bennett. I don't proceed until the cria reacts with total nonchalance to this procedure. Memphis was so calm and cooperative the very first time I used the catch rope on her that I immediately progressed to fitting the halter. I clipped on the lead. Memphis looked up at me expectantly. “We're going for a walk,” I explained in a friendly tone of voice. A tiny tug on the lead, a step forward, and Memphis followed. I had never lead trained a puppy with such ease.

Jacalyn, who boards her animals with us, had the same pleasant experience when she trained Libby, her very first alpaca. Libby was the perfect cria for a novice owner. Jacalyn was to have a much more difficult time with Pearl. I've come to the conclusion that Pearl is highly intelligent and prefers to set her own agenda. She wants to be the one in charge. Luckily, Jacalyn is a patient and intuitive woman. Pearl certainly put her patience to the test! Crias that want to lead rather than follow are, in my experience, more difficult to train than the frightened ones that are frozen to a spot in sheer terror.

I've described two extremes. Most crias will fall somewhere in between. Without exception, all will be helped by the thoughtful methods of the *Camelidynamics* program.

By chance, I discovered an additional, magical technique to help me handle and train not only crias but also adult alpacas that are unusually fearful. I should thank the author of the book that added another dimension to my program. Unfortunately, I recall neither the book's title nor the author's name. All I remember is that it was a book about the history of the American cowboy. The author explained that cowboys sang to their cattle to calm the animals and prevent dangerous and costly stampedes. Is it true that cowboys sang while circling the grazing and resting herds at night? I don't know, but what I read left me thoughtful and pondering my handling and training of alpacas. If singing calmed cattle, why shouldn't it work for nervous alpaca crias? Who would know if I tried it and was not successful? Only the alpacas would be witnesses to my failure, and they'd never tell.

Alpaca crias that are very scared usually do one of two things. They either freeze or turn into whirling dervishes at the end of the lead. Singing gives confidence to the former and calms the latter. When I sing to a frightened cria, I use a monotone, soothing “sing-song” voice. Sometimes, I make up words as I go along. Oddly, I often find my choice to be a song from my childhood in Germany. My favorite—and the one that works best—is a haunting, melodramatic ballad about two royal children who fell in love but were unable to reach each other across a wide stream. I continue to be amazed at the effect this song has on crias that are normally too scared to concentrate on anything but their fear. Those rooted to a spot suddenly walk behind me as nicely as you please. The ones thrashing on the ground or doing flips at the end of the lead soon stop the hysteria.

These magical results remind me of an old German fairytale called *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln*. It's the story of a rat catcher who becomes angry at the citizens of Hameln when they try to cheat him. He takes revenge by bringing his flute to the market place. As he starts to play, the boys and girls of Hameln gather around him and eventually follow him out of town. The parents never see their children again. These kind of stories were popular long before the age of political

Excerpt from “The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm”
By Ingrid Wood, Copyright 2011

correctness. Of course, the “children” I sing to are always returned to their alpaca mothers at the conclusion of each lesson.

In the beginning, I sang only to the crias during halter training. Eventually, it occurred to me that my technique would work just as well with crias that were nervous, for example, during inoculations. Success! “Why stop here?” I thought. By the time a boarded adult alpaca, Pamela, was scheduled for an ultrasound, I had gotten over any embarrassment I may have felt earlier. “Why should I feel self-conscious if my methods bring comfort to animals?” I thought. Nevertheless, I considered it prudent to warn Dr. Lee about the strange concert she was about to witness. I am not an accomplished singer.

“This female is new to the farm and still very nervous,” I explained as Dr. Lee set up her ultrasound equipment in our barn. “I’ll be singing to Pamela to keep her calm,” I added.

The unflappable Dr. Lee didn’t even blink. “Oh, O.K.,” was all she said.

The haltered Pamela was brought into the darkened barn. I loosely tied her lead to a stall panel. As I gently held her in balance, Dr. Lee started her work. I could feel Pamela’s body go tense. She made nervous snorting noises and hummed in alarm. Very softly, I started singing little nonsense songs, telling Pamela she was a beautiful girl and would soon be free again to join the herd on the pasture.

Pamela relaxed. Instead of standing high up on her toes, she settled back into a normal stance. She lowered her neck, and her breathing became calm and steady. Soon, Dr. Lee was finished with the examination. Pamela stood still while I slowly removed her halter.

At first, I was reluctant to share the stories of my cria songs with other breeders. Now I don’t care. The cria songs work. We talked about the songs during last year’s *Camelidynamics* workshop held on Stormwind Farm.

“Yes, I know they work,” one participant agreed. “We have a female with an infected foot. The infection needs to be treated every day. My husband does it, and he sings to our girl the whole time he’s putting on the ointment. It keeps her calm.”

I am not sure why the thought of singing to soothe the crias did not occur to me earlier. It works with human infants. Unfortunately, modern parenting no longer includes loving mothers singing lullabies to help their babies fall asleep.

It is Dr. Temple Grandin’s belief that music is part of our evolutionary roots. In *Animals in Translation*, she not only discusses birds, the obvious musicians in the animal world, but also the songs of humpback whales.

Alpacas use a spectrum of sounds to communicate with one another. Mamas hum to their crias and vice versa. Adults hum when they are nervous or frightened. Females often “talk” to one another for comfort and reassurance, for example while one herd member is giving birth. The most vigilant of the herd members sound a shrill alarm call if they detect a person, an animal, or an object they perceive to pose a danger to the herd. Alpaca males orgle during the mating ritual. Some females refuse to cush and submit to a silent suitor.

When the young daughter of a fellow breeder heard the farm’s herdsire orgle in the breeding pen, she called, “Mom, come quickly, Sasha is singing his song.”

I find it interesting that the little girl perceived the orgling as “singing.” No wonder my alpacas are so responsive to what I call cria songs.

Music can have a hypnotizing effect. Army generals knew this. It’s no accident that generations of infantry soldiers marched into battle and to their deaths to the rhythmic cadence of drums and even entire bands playing. Why would alpacas not be mildly hypnotized by the sound of cria songs? They are, after all, mammals like us.

Gifted handlers and trainers have apparently always used singing to communicate calm reassurance as well as praise to their animals. Long before I knew what an alpaca was, an English

Excerpt from “The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm”
By Ingrid Wood, Copyright 2011

trainer named Henry Blake sang to horses for the same reasons that I sing to my alpacas. He wrote a book about his training methods. The title is *Talking With Horses*. It was published in the USA in 1976. I find it strange that the English queen, a superb horsewoman, paid so much attention to a North American trainer called “The Horse Whisperer” when she had a homegrown “whisperer” living practically under her royal nose. In his work with horses, Henry Blake described using the same monotone “sing-song” voice I use with alpacas. Without knowing it, I was practicing methods identical to those of a successful English horse trainer!

Far away from England, on another continent, a livestock herder used the technique to communicate with a bird. He had never heard of Henry Blake. Karen Blixen, who wrote under her pen name Isak Dinesen, told the very moving story in *Out of Africa*. On her Kenyan farm in the African Highlands, Blixen had a German cuckoo-clock. At noon each day, the little Kikuyu boys—called totos—used to leave their goats and sheep in front of Blixen’s farm house to watch and listen to the cuckoo as it sprang out of the clock’s innards for its midday call. One tiny toto came back by himself some days, stood in front of the clock, and talked to the cuckoo in a slow sing-song voice. It is immaterial that the solemn, little fellow didn’t realize that the wooden cuckoo was not alive. He was a true animal “whisperer” and most assuredly sang to his goats and sheep. Blixen repeatedly mentioned in her book how passionate the Native Kikuyus felt about their livestock.

In *Talking With Horses*, Henry Blake came across as a practical, hardworking man, with definite goals of what he wanted to accomplish with the horses under his care. He did not appear to be given to fanciful dreams and hysterical thoughts.

Nevertheless, he firmly believed in extra-sensory perception (ESP) as well as telepathy when it came to working with horses. ESP is the transfer of moods and feelings from humans to horses while telepathy is the transfer of mental pictures. I agree with Henry Blake that both ESP and telepathy are possible between members of different species. Individuals must be open to this type of communication. They must be in the right frame of mind. I do think that there are many imposters and charlatans in this field who only have the gift of gab. That’s unfortunate because I am convinced that the true gift exists.

The subject of communication between humans and animals is fascinating in its full complexity. Why do some people instinctively have the ability to connect with animals, to understand their motives, and to interpret their behavior? Why are others so oblivious to what animals are trying to tell them? The second group includes people who like or even profess to love animals. They certainly wish them no harm yet often show an utter lack of understanding animal emotions and behavior.

Dr. Grandin, who is autistic, believes that because people with autism view their environment differently than “normal” people, it is easier for them to access the world of animals. She gives examples of how autistic people see small details that, for example, cause cattle to react fearfully in a slaughter facility. I don’t doubt that Dr. Grandin is right, but I feel intuitively that autism is not a prerequisite to understanding and communicating with other species.

I am convinced that many people—autistic or not—have the innate ability to master cross species communication skills but are simply not willing to do so. Surely one reason is the common attitude that humans rule over the animals under their care, and it is not up to the rulers to learn the language of their subjects. Additionally, our fast-paced and very noisy environment has dulled as well as overwhelmed our senses to a point where the often quiet and subtle language of prey animals escapes our notice.

Over the years, I’ve noticed how many people are uncomfortable in a quiet room with no distractions. Cria songs will not work if the singer does not rest peacefully within herself or himself. You cannot soothe others if you are not calm yourself.

Excerpt from “The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm”
By Ingrid Wood, Copyright 2011

There is a component of my management program for which I have not found an effective way to communicate verbally with the alpacas. When I wish to confine the alpacas in a small area for various procedures, I must either lure them with food or use a herding tape to direct them into a catch pen. I was therefore fascinated to read about a high-pitched vocal technique called kulning. I have not heard the kulning sound and don't know whether it resembles the yodeling practiced by herders in the various European alpine regions. It has been used for centuries by female Swedish shepherds to communicate with cattle and other grazing animals. Traditionally, the herding calls— kulning has no lyrics—are practiced by Swedish women who accompany their animals to distant pastures from May to October. The sounds carry over several miles. The women use kulning to gather the animals at night, or when it's time to move on to another pasture.

There are people who think this is all romantic nonsense. That's their loss. I have a fairly good understanding of why the cria songs work. I am not sure why my crias seem to respond to the story of the two separated royal lovers more so than to other songs. As the story unfolds, the prince drowns during the attempt to reach his love. When a fisherman finds his corpse, the princess enters the water to end her own life. Not long ago, I translated the verses for a friend born and raised in this country.

“Good Lord, they had you kids singing this morbid tale at summer camp?” Linda shook her head.

They certainly did—and usually around the camp fire at night. I still remember the quiet afterwards. Those camp counselors were no fools!