**About Alpacas**

History

Alpacas were first created and domesticated in Northern Peru some 5,000 plus years ago. The alpacas were domesticated and bred for meat and fibre, the finest fibre being harvested for Incan royalty. Alpaca mummies from this time show alpaca breeders had achieved an enviable excellence of fibre quality and uniformity of fleece with consistent fibre diameters of around 17 to 20 microns. Unfortunately this all changed with the Spanish Conquest of 1532, when Incan civilisation was devastated and the generations of carefully bred herds of alpacas were dispersed and nearly destroyed, to be replaced by sheep.

 Fleece

The alpaca is the most colour diverse fibre-producing animal in the world. There are 22 colours including shades of black, brown, grey, fawn and white. Alpacas produce a fleece each year that uniquely shares the characteristics of both hair and wool. The insulating qualities of the fleece are incomparable and protect them against the extremes of temperature found in the Andes. The huacaya fleece has additional insulating qualities to the suri, because of its fine, wool like structure, which traps air amongst the crimped fibre. Bunched together, the fibres support each other, standing out perpendicular to the skin, giving the fleece a bulky appearance. The Suri alpaca fibre hangs from a central parting and is more hair-like – straight, long locks – like dreadlocks with no crimp, which means they do not have the same insulating qualities of the Huacaya leaving them more vulnerable to cold and particularly extreme wet. With the exception of mohair, alpacas produce the strongest animal fibre in the world, coupled with a beautiful softness, it is no wonder that alpaca fibre is as desirable in the fashion industry as cashmere. In Victorian times there was a thriving industry in Yorkshire, manufacturing garments made of alpaca fibre and no Victorian gentleman would plan to travel abroad without his alpaca coat.

Personality

Alpacas have a strong herding instinct, coupled with a designated pecking order and they become very stressed if kept alone. Females need the support structure of other females to be around at birthing and with cria care. Although they are excellent jumpers, they choose not to risk being separated from the rest of their herd. They communicate with each other by body posture and a variety of noises, mostly humming, but also high pitched occasional squeals.

Breeding

Alpaca females are induced ovulators. This means they can be bred at any time during the year, with gestation of around 11½ months. The female ‘spits-off’ the stud male when she knows she is pregnant and will not allow him near her. Alpacas are excellent and attentive mothers and usually give birth with ease during daylight hours, this is a legacy of cria having to be mobile and dry by nightfall, 12,000 feet up in the Andes of their homeland. While the mother takes a rest after birthing, the aunts, sisters and maidens come forward to inspect the new baby.

Cria (Alpaca babies)

Cria are usually up and nursing within ninety minutes and weaned at about five to six months.

Living

Alpacas live for between fifteen to twenty years, usually weigh between 60 to 80 kg and stand around 90cms at the shoulder. As with other camelids, alpacas have a soft pad with two toenails, which creates minimum damage to grazing. Their droppings are situated in various communal sites throughout their field.