

THE REALITY ABOUT GUARD LLAMAS

BY NIKI KUKLENSKI

People always want to know about llamas as guardians for various breeds of livestock. Some are under the false impression that llamas will transform into the “Super Hero” who will swoop in and save their livestock under any circumstance. Meanwhile, some individuals believe that a llama will kill with their fighting teeth, or kill anything that enters their guarding domain. While it is true that llamas can be used as guardians, several considerations should be granted.

Your first line of defense is ALWAYS good fencing. A llama cannot be counted on to take on a pack of dogs or a large predator (cougar, bear etc.). A good guard llama can only detour a single smaller dog, coyotes or predator of this nature. The most practical approach to utilizing a guard llama is to alert the owner that there is a potential problem in the pasture. This alerting is done by alarm calling, insistent behaviors (trying to lead the owner to a potential problem like a sheep in distress over a hill), and herding of the livestock into a smaller area.

Not every llama is a guardian llama. After all, not every human wants to flip burgers for a living! A true guardian llama is worth their weight in gold and shows concern for their charges when challenged. They sometimes will not even hang out with their charges, grazing nearby or sitting on a high spot away from the herd. Some guardian

llamas take a couple of months to settle into the routine to become accustomed to the new job, so don't assume they aren't guarding. You won't know if they are working until a situation arises. If a potential intruder does come near or into the pasture area and the llama runs leaving the herd behind, it probably isn't a guardian llama.

Some people will claim that they have geldings or intact males that have worked out as guardians. I will NEVER place an intact or gelding as a guard-



lian animal except with larger animals like horses or cattle. Nearly every gelding or intact llama placed with goats, sheep or other smaller animals will eventually attempt to breed these animals. As a result, the smaller livestock can be smothered and sustain serious injuries. I call this regularly seen behavior, “geldings gone pervert.”



shape for your job! Guardians also require regular care just like the livestock they are guarding. Nails, shearing, shots and camelid minerals are the basics for most llama needs.

Guardian llamas primary job is protecting their herd. Do not expect them to do 4-H, drive, pack or other jobs. If you remove them from their guarding situation, it usually upsets them and creates unnecessary stress. If you want to do other things with your llamas, consider getting llamas specifically for those other activities and leave your guardian llama at home with their flock!

For example, in one case I dealt with, a gelding trampled the lamb while trying to breed the ewe. Another gelding began breeding his sheep charges after eleven years of being okay with them. I have even seen male llamas try to breed horses, mini horses, donkeys and cows. There is no way to find out if males and geldings are safe around smaller livestock, so I only place female guardians now.

From past experience, I have had a 100% success placing females that have either had cria or are adults as guardian llamas. They have nurturing instincts of a mother and usually bond quickly to the animals they are guarding. I do NOT recommend breeding your guardian female. This will result in her shifting her instincts to her cria and ignore the animals she is intended to protect.

If you are selecting an animal as a guard, take time to carefully analyze the structure of the animal you are considering to ensure that it is sound. Individuals will try to place broken down or older animals that they don't want any longer into guard homes. Even though a llama is only guarding, it still needs to be sound and healthy. The animal should not have dropped pasterns, be bucking at the knees, or be in the early stages of break down. Try to seek out animals that are healthy and in good enough

A guardian llama can be used effectively as a herd management tool. I would suggest that anybody interested in learning more about guardian llamas, seek out your local llama rescue group or reputable llama breeder who has females they are willing to sell as guards. Many rescue groups have a large number of female non-breeders available that need homes and are well suited to a guarding situation with good fencing.

Biography-

Niki Kuklenski and her husband Jeff are very involved with all aspects of owning llamas. They own two ALSA Elite Champions, several ALSA Performance Champions and the 2003 ALSA National Performance Champion. Niki is a 4-H leader, ALSA Judge and high school substitute teacher. Niki and Jeff drive, show, pack, therapy work and educate with their llamas. Niki's passion is llama history and memorabilia. She spends most of her free time tracking down old pictures and llama owners to help preserve our industry's history. <http://www.nas.com/~jnkllamas> jnkllamas@nas.com 360-592-2603