

CHAPTER 2

What is an Alpaca?

South American Camelids

Alpacas, or Alpaca vicunos, are members of the camel (Camelid) family of South America. Their ancestors originated on the central plains of North America about 10 million years ago. These llama-like ancestors migrated south to what is now South America and evolved into primitive examples of today's Alpacas Guanaco and Vicuna.

By the end of the last ice age (10,000–12,000 years ago), Camelids no longer existed in North America. It is believed that alpacas were domesticated from the wild vicuna in the Andean highlands of Peru about 7,000 years ago, and they are among the oldest domestic animals in the world. Alpacas are found in South America in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile west of the Andes Mountains.

Today's Camelid family includes the two humped Bactrian camel of Asia, the one humped Dromedary camel of the Mid-east and Africa, and the New World Camelids in South America—the guanaco, the llama, the alpaca, and the vicuna. Of the New World Camel family, only the alpaca and the llama are domesticated, although annually there are roundups of vicuna called *chacus* where the vicuna are shorn for their fleece. The fiber harvested from these vicunas is the finest and most valuable animal fiber in the world.

For thousands of years the alpaca was intensively selected and bred by the Inca for their fleeces of abundant, fine fiber. The alpaca was involved in every aspect of the Andean civilization. Besides providing fleeces for warm, luxurious clothing, they were also used for

Alpacas are part of the Camel Family which originated in the area around Kansas and Nebraska in the United States!



meat, hides, and as religious symbols. Even their dung was collected and used for fires in peasant homes.

South American alpaca husbandry reached its zenith in the 11th and 12th centuries A.D. under the Inca Empire. During the 16th century, when the Spanish conquered Peru, the alpaca was viewed as an inferior animal to the Spanish sheep and cattle, driven from its pedestal in the Incan Empire, and sent to the higher elevations of Bolivia and Peru known as the “altiplano” (high plains). This area is above 14,000 feet elevation and is a very harsh environment, but the alpaca adapted amazingly well, and did survive, but due to the limited vegetation and husbandry practices (and slaughter by the Spanish), the numbers of alpacas remained relatively small. According to some sources, today there are over 3.5 million alpacas in Peru (roughly 90 percent of the world resource).

The United States had its first importation of alpacas from Chile in 1983, and then in 1984 and 1988. In 1991 we received our first importation from Peru. Importations and breeding has grown the United States alpaca herd to over 200,000 alpacas in the Alpaca Owners Association Registry. There are also large populations of alpacas in Australia and Canada as well as smaller numbers in Great Britain, Europe, New Zealand, and southern Africa.

Where Are Alpacas Raised?

Alpacas now live across North America, from Florida to Quebec and Alaska to Maryland. They are remarkably resilient animals, successfully adapting to both very hot and very cold climates. In hot, humid areas, alpaca owners must take extra precautions to prevent heat stress. These include shearing fleeces before the heat index rises, providing fans and ventilation in the barn, offering cool, fresh water, and hosing off their



bellies, where heat dissipates, on extremely hot days. In colder climates, alpacas need adequate shelter to protect them from wind, rain, or snow.

Compared to other livestock, alpacas are easy to care for. They need clean, fresh water; adequate pasture or hay; minerals; and shelter to protect them from extreme weather. Some owners also choose to provide additional food supplements, such as grain or pellets.

Alpacas are environmentally friendly and have efficient digestive systems. You can usually raise two to eight alpacas per acre, depending on terrain, seasons, rainfall, pasture availability, and access to fresh water. They can also be kept on a dry lot and fed grass hay, minerals, and fresh water.

Since their only defenses are kicking or spitting, alpacas require sound fencing at least five feet tall to keep predators like wolves, coyotes, and dogs out of their pastures. In extreme weather conditions, very hot or very cold, extra care may be necessary to keep them comfortable.

Who Owns Alpacas?

One of the most interesting things about our North American alpaca industry is the diversity of alpaca owners. The alpacas' smaller size, gentle nature, and ease of care make them

popular with both young and old. Many alpaca owners had little or no experience with livestock before owning alpacas, while some come from extensive agricultural backgrounds. Alpacas are a great choice of livestock for the family. Children as young as four can handle a well-trained alpaca with an adult's assistance. Their fleece is attractive to those who enjoy the fiber arts and going to alpaca shows and competing can be great fun for all ages.

What Are Alpacas Raised For?

All around the world, alpacas are raised primarily for their soft and luxurious fleece. Each shearing produces roughly five to ten pounds of fleece per animal, per year. Alpaca fleece is considered a specialty fiber due to its limited availability and exquisite characteristics. It is recognized for its fineness, softness, light-weight, durability, thermal qualities, and luster. It can be made into a wide array of products from next to skin apparel, to beautiful carpets. The only fleece finer than the alpaca is from its cousin the vicuna, which remains wild and protected in South America.

Each spring, across North America, alpacas are shorn to harvest their fleeces. Alpaca owners may sell their fleeces to individuals or cooperatives, they may choose to send their fiber to a fiber mill for processing into yarn that they may sell or use themselves, or they may keep it for use in their own artistic endeavors.

In addition to selling the fleece and the animals, many alpaca owners operate a retail store selling alpaca end-products—either on or off their farms. Products are sold directly to consumers at their store or over the Internet. Many also sell alpaca products through craft fairs, farmers markets, and retail sites. Sales of these end-products can provide considerable supplemental income to alpaca owners.

Compared to sheep's wool, alpaca fleece is



generally stronger, lighter, warmer, and more resilient. Finer grades of alpaca fleece, known commercially as 'Baby Alpaca,' are considered hypoallergenic, meaning they don't irritate the skin as other wools sometimes do. Unlike sheep's wool, alpaca fleece contains no lanolin, making it ready to spin after minimal cleaning. Prized for its unique silky feel and superb 'handle,' alpaca fleece is highly sought after by both cottage-industry artists (hand-spinners, knitters, weavers, etc.) and the commercial fashion industry.

Alpaca fleece has a great variety of natural colors, making it very much in vogue: 16 official colors (white; beige; three shades of fawn, three shades of brown, bay black, true black, and six shades of grey) with many other subtle shades and hues. White, light fawn, and light grey can be readily dyed, thus offering a rainbow of colors for the fiber artist. Alpaca fleece can also be combined with other fine fibers such as merino



Huacaya (wuh-KAI-ya)



Suri (SUR-ee)



Huacaya fiber with zig zag pattern.



Suri fiber showing straight locks

wool, cashmere, mohair, silk, tencel, and angora to attain incredible blends.

Some alpaca breeders will use those alpacas that do not adequately meet their requirements for desirable fleece traits for meat and hides. This is a new market and has not gained total acceptance by all alpaca breeders. Alpaca manure is also excellent for compost and increasing soil fertility.

Huacaya and Suri Fleece Types

There are two fleece types of alpaca, Huacaya and Suri. When they are shorn, the Suri and Huacaya look almost identical, but once their fleece begins to grow, they can be easily differentiated by their distinctive types of fiber.

When you examine a Huacaya fleece closely, you can see the individual fibers possess a wave or crimp. The fiber is soft to the touch and sticks out perpendicularly from the skin giving the animal in full fleece a rounded appearance similar to sheep.

A Suri's fleece parts down the middle of the back and hangs in long, silky, locks. The individual fibers are long and straight and the Suri fleece possesses a silky feel and shine that drapes on the animal in lustrous locks. Alpaca fleece and fiber will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 14.

Are Alpacas Clean Animals?

Alpacas are much cleaner than most livestock, have minimal aroma, and tend to attract less flies in the summertime. Furthermore, alpacas often defecate in communal dung piles. There may be three or four of these areas in a pasture. This makes for easy clean-up, less odor, reduced opportunity for parasites, and better overall hygiene in the herd.

How Long Do Alpacas Live?

Alpacas live around 15 to 20 years. The longest documented lifespan of an alpaca is 28 years.

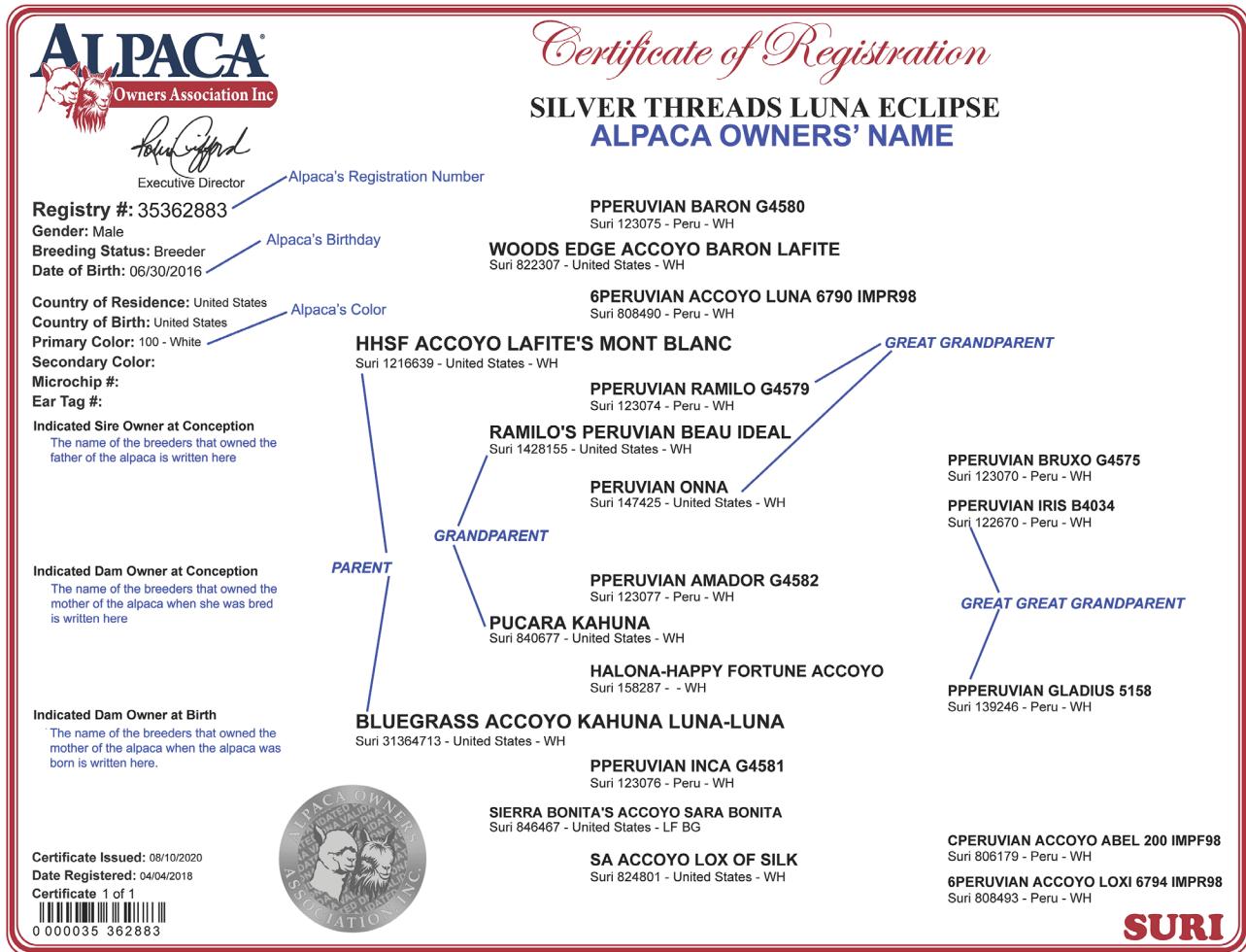
Are Alpacas Easy to Breed and Do They Birth Easily?

Alpacas usually are bred at 18 months of age or older. Typically, owners choose a specific herdsire that is brought to the female, but some farms will turn one herdsire out into a field with a group of females to mate with all of them over a week or two. Gestation or pregnancy takes approximately 330 to 365 days.

In most cases, crias (alpaca babies) are born without intervention, and usually during the first half of the daylight hours. Normally a cria weighs between 15 and 19 pounds and will be standing and nursing within 90 minutes of birth. The cria continues to nurse for about six months until it is weaned from its mother.

What Noise Do Alpacas Make?

Alpacas are usually very quiet which is an appealing characteristic if neighbors reside close to where they are kept. They are docile animals that make a minimal amount of sound. They do make a humming sound as a means of communication or to express concern or stress. Most communication between alpacas is nonverbal. Occasionally, alpacas will make a sound similar to a donkey's bray, known as an alarm call, to alert their herd to danger. Male alpacas also "serenade" females during breeding with a guttural, throaty sound called orgling. Lastly, male alpacas will make a screeching sound when they fight. Fighting can occur to establish dominance when competing for a female.



Is It Okay to Have Just One Alpaca?

No. Alpacas have very strong herd instincts and need the companionship of other alpacas to thrive, preferably three or more. Alpacas are livestock, and should not be treated as house pets.

Alpacas should be kept with their own sex with a few exceptions. One exception is that male crias need to be kept with their mothers until weaning. Gelded males should not be housed together with females, as they can repeatedly attempt to breed the females. This can lead to serious health consequences for the females.

Are Alpacas Easy to Train?

Alpacas are intelligent and relatively easy to train. It's best to start training them young so they accept a halter and learn to follow a lead. Many owners also enjoy training them to walk through obstacles. Some even compete in shows where alpacas walk over, through, and around objects, and also jump small hurdles.

Also, it is helpful to train alpacas to ride in a trailer or van if they ever need to be transported to a show or another farm. Alpacas are easy to transport, as they normally crouch (lay down with their legs folded under them) when traveling. Be aware that alpacas should not be tied up when traveling. Chapter 15 provides more information about training.

What Is a Pedigree?

A pedigree for an alpaca is no different than a pedigree for a dog or other livestock. It is a record of an animal's parents, grand-parents, and generations of ancestors. The Alpaca Registry of the Alpaca Owners Association (AOA), maintains the pedigree database for alpacas in the United States and for some alpacas in Canada.

The AOA Registry requires that alpacas must have their parentage validated by DNA testing before an alpaca is permitted to be registered. The DNA of the dam and sire must match that of the cria before it is registered. Once this is accomplished, or after an alpaca is purchased, a new pedigree is issued in the new owner's name, and a certificate is sent reflecting that ownership, the alpaca's name, date of birth, and who owned the alpacas at the time of its conception, as well as its pedigree. The pedigree also indicates where an alpaca's ancestors were born. All the information contained on the pedigree can be very helpful when making decisions about breeding your alpacas.

To compete in AOA certified shows, alpacas must be registered by AOA.

What You Should Know

- Alpacas are members of the camel family.
- Alpacas are originally from the South American countries Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina.
- There are four members of the Camel Family in South America. The Vicuna and Guanaco which are wild, and the Llama and Alpaca which are domesticated.
- Alpacas are raised primarily for their fleece.
- There are two types of alpacas distinguished by their fleece, Huacayas and Suris.
- Huacaya alpacas have fiber that has a zig zag pattern and sticks out from their body.
- Suri Alpacas have fiber that is straight and hangs in locks off their body.
- With proper care and shelter, alpacas are raised from Florida to Quebec and from Alaska to Maryland.
- Alpacas primarily eat grass or hay.
- Most alpacas are easy to train.
- Alpacas cannot live by themselves, they need at least one buddy—preferably more.
- Compared to other livestock, alpacas are easy to take care of.
- Alpacas generally live around 15 to 20 years.
- Alpaca babies are called crias.
- Alpaca pregnancies last approximately 330 to 365 days and it is rare for them to give birth to more than one cria.