

How to do it on your own

Julie Taylor-Browne

Camelidynamics Instructor

I came to Camelidynamics in 2002 because I wanted to find a way of handling my animals without having to resort to 'forceful persuasion.' I also needed to do things to alpacas on my own and wanted to find some techniques and skills to help me with this. I was reminded of this recently whilst teaching in France, where I met Clara, a French alpaca shearer, who had recently sheared some llamas with the help of 17 firefighters! She had come on my course to get some pointers on working with animals in a calmer, quieter way with less stress for animal, owner and shearer (and firefighters).

I think it is often easier to manage your alpacas and llamas on your own as the 'help' we enlist (spouses and partners, next door neighbours, interested friends and the kids) don't always make it easier and sometimes they make it harder. For example, if my helpers are not aware that Katya, one of my llamas, thinks it is the best game ever trying to evade our herding techniques and they aren't prepared for her to make a cunning break (or two) for freedom, with her best friend Lucy hot on her heels, the two of them will get away and then the rest of the alpaca herd will suddenly feel that they can't possibly go in without her and the job takes at least twice as long as it ought to. A regular helper of mine likes to wave his arms up and down whilst herding when there is no need to, this makes the herd move faster and behave more suspiciously than if we just moved towards them slowly and calmly with our herding tape at their chest height.

Similarly, when working with animals in their pens I may end up with a 'helper' who is unaware that their body position is really important to the animal. If they stand in front of the alpaca, position themselves too close to the head or wave their hands around at the animal's eye level I will have an animal that will move to find a safer position. I will need to train my helper as to where and how to stand in the pen in a way which generates as little movement as possible from the alpaca.

As a consequence, if I am going to have a helper around for a while (we were Wwoof* hosts for a number of years), I will teach them how to work with my herd, but if they are not going to be around for very long I often find it simpler, quicker and less stressful for all concerned to do the job myself. So far I haven't found anything I can't do on my own, apart from castrating and shearing.

Camelidynamics teaches that an alpaca will stay calm and quiet if you remember four rules which were developed in response to their nature as prey animals.

- Containment not restraint - work in a small area rather than grab and hold them.
- Escape Route - let them see an escape route, working in pens is ideal.
- Company - even if you are only working one animal, have others around it.
- Balance - make every effort to keep them in balance, this will keep them calm.

By setting up my facilities with these four principles in mind and consistently using the handling skills I have learnt, my herd have got easier and easier to handle on my own.

Everyday Husbandry



Feeding my camelids in the pens every day means that I can always get them in to the pens at feeding time and this enables me to carry out regular jobs which involve a few animals. Two to three alpacas (or one llama!) will go into each pen and if I need to do anything with them, I close the pen whilst they are in there and wait until they have finished eating to do whatever job I have earmarked for that day. I also close the pens on either side of the chosen animal so that they feel part of a herd and not isolated. As a prey animal, the alpaca is always going to feel safer in company than alone, and if the others leave, having finished their breakfast, they will panic and try to jump out of the pens. My pens are set up more or less permanently in the field although when I rotate pastures, I put the hurdles into the trailer and they move to the new field with us.

I use this arrangement, for example, for:

- working with babies to get them used to being handled.
- emergency rather than routine toenail trimming
- a non-routine injection, e.g. for a dental abscess
- picking off embedded brambles
- training alpacas
- trimming fringes
- mating and spitting off recently mated alpacas.

Most of my pens are made of sheep hurdles which are only 5ft long by 3ft 6in high, but I also have some of the larger (and taller) purpose made alpaca panels. Because I don't grab or wrestle with my camelids they don't jump out. My small pen size doesn't give the alpacas much room to move around, particularly when I am in it as well, making it easy for me to inject them. We also teach how to catch and hold camelids without restraining or panicking them on Camelidynamics courses.

Restraint free injecting



Over the years I have had one or two animals who are difficult to inject or to toenail trim. To overcome this, I have used a spare panel to make a 'mini' pen within the catch pen, and from here it is easy for me to inject or toenail trim on the ground (i.e. I don't lift the leg).



Easy toenail trimming. This 100kg male alpaca would rear and struggle if you tried to hold him still for toenail trimming. In this arrangement of pens he was perfectly content.

Animals handled in this way are usually well behaved in their mini-pen because it isn't the injecting or the toenail trimming which they are afraid of - it is the restraint. So standing in balance in their mini-pen (with the option to eat as an additional bonus) can turn a very difficult animal into a much easier one to handle.



Snoopy the llama, shown here, is injection-phobic, but is much calmer in this set up.

Herding your alpacas on your own

If I am going to do something to the whole herd or at least to most of them, I am going to bring them all into my barn where it is easy for me to run them through my very grandly named Alpaca Handling Facility (AHF). I never recommend using field shelters for handling tasks, for a number of reasons;

- they are too dark
- they have too few escape routes
- they are too big and the animals can move around too much
- alpacas shouldn't become reluctant to go into their field shelters.

My first job, therefore is to get them to go into the barn. It would be nice to believe that one would be able to just tempt them in there with a bucket of food, but once you have sheared them in there - they are going to be forever suspicious of this area and your motives! So I herd them in there. I learned recently that effective handlers need to emulate the stalking behaviour of predators. Temple Grandin describes the effective herding of cattle:

The "stalking" behavior simulated by the person is similar to the behavior of a predator such as a lion or a wolf. First, the predator locates the herd. Then it begins a slow survey of the herd by walking in a circular direction around the herd looking for weak or old animals. The behavior of the predator circling the herd causes anxiety in the animals. The cattle become uneasy over an impending attack by the predator and begin to loosely bunch together. This is an instinctual HARD WIRED behavior that is wired into the animal's brain. This uneasiness and slight anxiety comes before the fear and flight elicited by an actual attack. It is important to remember before attempting to use these methods that it is anxiety that makes this technique work and not fear. When the method is first used it triggers instinctual bunching behavior. The more a person works with the cattle, the calmer they become and instinctual bunching behavior is gradually replaced with calm learned behavior.

Herding on one's own is a bit of an art. It certainly helps for the herd to have been herded a few times with two people either end of a long, very visible rope or tape which trains them to move forward whenever they see the tape. However, if you don't have the luxury of another person in the initial stages you are still able to train them to herd simply by not giving them any options of where to go *except* in the direction you want them to. This can be done by dividing the pasture into smaller areas, either with permanent fencing (known as a 'fence that goes nowhere') or temporary fences. To make temporary fencing, I use plastic posts that hold electric tape for horses with two strands of tape or rope. If you use just one strand, your animals may just pop underneath....



Having an area narrow enough for you to herd is one important factor for success, the other factor is the height of the tape. Both ends of the tape or rope (one end is attached to a nonmoving object, the other is held by you) should be at the height of the herd's chests. Never think that you only need to take a proportion of the herd - you need to take all the animals in the field. You can't just take most of them and assume the others will follow - if one or two escape, the rest will try their utmost to join them! Move slowly towards them allowing them to bunch up and move away from you. If they look like they are going to challenge your tape, wait until they look like they are going to make a run at it and then move the hand holding the tape up and down to create a rippling effect in the tape. Once they change their minds about challenging the tape - stop rippling.



As you walk towards your animals holding one end of your herding tape, unless you have a very long tape or are working in a very small area you will need to move the tape forwards and reattach it. This is why it is important to keep your animals calm and moving slowly. If they are, you will have time to unhook and reattach your line.

Managing a herd of animals on one's own usually involves the concept of funnelling them from a wider space into a narrower. Many people have a lane or runway, which once they have got them into this makes herding very easy. You can use two 'wands' to make sure that no-one decides to turn back to the field.



Working in handling facilities

After I had had my alpacas for about three years I started to feel the need for something more purpose built for handling than just my outside pens. In particular, because of my



increasing work as a trainer I was dealing with a lot of recalcitrant (the literal translation of this is to kick out!) camelids and I needed larger, taller and more substantial pens. So we converted a cattle shed and it has worked very well. It has eight separate pens, but the partitions can be taken down to make larger pens, which I have used for mummies and vulnerable alpaca babies, shearing, ill alpacas and holding pens for husbandry tasks.

Alpacas may be reluctant to go into your barn, although if you can design it so that your barn has an escape route at the other end (e.g. a gate) the alpacas will be happy to move through the barn towards the escape route. As mine does not, I placed a large acrylic mirror at the opposite end to the entrance and discovered to my great delight that alpacas are really vain and love to look at themselves, so they move forward through the barn to get close to the mirror.

Because we humans are descended from monkeys, we have inherited the unfortunate simian habits of waving our arms around, chattering (apparently uncontrollably) and grabbing things. All these habits are very confusing to camelids who do none of these things. So gesticulations (*go that way!*), verbal commands (*left! go left!*) and attempts at steering them (*git in there!*) are unpleasant, alarming and simply incomprehensible for them, whereas a couple of white sticks make it so obvious for them you can almost hear



your alpacas sign with relief (*oh they want us to go that way.....*), and they magically start to 'behave'!

So once I have got them into the barn, I need to put them into the smaller working and handling areas and I use my wands to direct the traffic, e.g. this alpaca can go forward and this one needs to stay back.

For example if I want all mummies and babies in one pen I will use my wands for this task. Using wands is so much better than using one's

hands to either push from behind (which often sets off the kick reflex) or the grab around the neck in an attempt to point the front end in the direction in which you want them to move. Grabbing animals simply makes them more nervous and more efficient at evading you, particularly as you have demonstrated to them that their necks are stronger than your arms. I regularly get requests for new wands because the alpaca owner has lost one and 'can't manage without them'.

My small pen system worked well enough until I bought weighing scales and started to regularly drench the animals when I decided I needed a permanent 'mini-pen' for this purpose, and a system that didn't need to have two people to work the animals through it. I had set up a slightly Heath Robinson-esque arrangement using hurdles and cable ties, it wasn't great but it worked well enough.

Now I have replaced this contraption with the Easy Pen** and it works very well for me, my alpacas and my llamas. However, in my experience I have found that you have to use this or any other similar arrangement in conjunction with the alpacas' natural instinct which is to be part of the herd. Therefore I split the herd so that a number of them go into the half of the facility with the mini or Easy pen in it and another part of the herd go into the large pen immediately in front of it. I put hay nets in each double size pen and into the central area. The unwritten rule of alpaca gastronomy is that hay out of net tastes much better than identical hay in the field in a feeder so everyone is happy. The first alpaca goes into the easy pen - looking directly at the rest of the herd in front of her, and is thus surrounded on three sides by alpacas.

She is let out after whatever procedure she needs and she then hangs out in the central area (eating the delicious hay...). The next alpaca in the pen will have alpacas on all four sides. This keeps them remarkably calm. In contrast, however the other day I was showing someone how the Easy Pen works. I had a very calm, well trained suri (yes they do exist!) on a head collar and a lead and I led her over and put her in the pen to demonstrate it. She had been through the pen certainly a dozen times in her life, probably more, but this time she panicked and tried to get under the sides - to get back to the others who were on the other side of the barn.

Once in the barn and running the alpacas through my set up, I can weigh them, drench them, spray them with frontline if necessary, inject and toenail trim. When I had less than ten animals I taught them all to lift their feet up for me to trim their feet. Now I don't bother because it is so easy for me to trim their toenails on the ground. If they are on the weighing scales (I use the Salter PS1000 scales) then there is a clear view of the toenail and I trim with my nippers almost parallel to the ground.

Once I have finished with each animal it is let into the central area, where they wait for their companions. I don't let any out until it is really crowded there, as this upsets the remaining ones. I prefer to have someone to put an animal in the Bracelet (a very useful Camelidynamics technique) for me to do the microchipping and ear-tagging, as they have the option of doing TTouch to calm the animal, but if I really needed to, I could do it by myself in this configuration.

You don't need to have as many pens as I do. Instead, you could as one of my clients with 90 alpacas does, have a small 'marshalling yard' with three pens set up in it. She herds her animals into this smaller area, then uses her herding wands to separate out the one(s) she wants and puts them in the pen with company either side. Alternatively you could just have one pen and have the others milling around this pen on as many sides and as close as possible. Another client with 60 llamas has two nice pens made from wooden gates in her marshalling yard, and within one of these is an Easy Pen which can be tied flat to the sides when not in use. We recently ran five or six animals through it for the first time, all remained calm as they were surrounded by their herd, whilst being in the Easy Pen.

I hope I have shown you some pointers on how to work with your herd on your own in order to have calm, easily managed camelids. If you would like to find out more about Camelidynamics equipment, courses and training please have a look at my website. www.carthveanalpacas.com or e-mail me on taylor.browne@clara.net. We are currently looking for hosts for workshops in 2012.

References:

Wwoof* Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms: www.wwoof.org.uk

Grandin, T. (www.grandin.com/b.williams.html)

Easy Pen**: www.marshwood-alpacas.co.uk