

WHAT TO DO WITH BESERK MALES (AND FEMALES...)

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In the fifteen years I have been training and working with camelids and their owners, I have seen and heard too many heart-breaking stories about 'beserk' alpacas who have ended isolated and/or neglected, abused or euthanized. I am contacted about male and female 'berserk' alpacas two to three times a month about problems that could have been prevented or ameliorated with the correct advice.

WHAT IS A 'BESERK' ALPACA?

I believe that the behaviour we label as 'beserk' is on a spectrum caused by inappropriate early imprinting. You may have an 'over-friendly' alpaca that runs up to investigate you all over and sniffs, clucks or snorts at you. It might also stand in your way and this can progress to biting your clothes or your hair or kicking at you when you try to move around it. Although they often like to be stroked on their necks they can switch quickly to being difficult to handle when you want to put a halter on or lead it.

At one end of this unwanted behaviour spectrum are bossy alpacas that just want to be in charge of you. At the other end of the spectrum, they can be dangerously aggressive, running along the fence between you, screaming, spitting, rearing up and trying to bite you over the fence. If anyone were to go into their field it will leave the herd and come running over at speed to rear up, chest butt, knock them down, kick them or try and mate them.

Which alpacas are most likely to become beserk? In my experience they often come from very small herds, and/or have owners who have followed bad advice on handling and hand rearing newborns, where lone cria that have been treated as cuddly pets and where ungelded, single males are used as stock guards. Marty McGee Bennett refers to this as Novice Handler Syndrome¹. Any of these experiences compromise alpacas' ability to develop normal herd behaviour, rendering them confused, frustrated and unable to relate appropriately to both humans and other alpacas.

There are always warning signs about this behaviour earlier in the animal's history and this behaviour may have been unwittingly encouraged, rather than positively discouraged. I hear things such as 'the children liked to play with him', 'we thought it was cute' and 'I thought he loved me!'. Prevention is key as many of these problems could easily have been circumvented by encouraging the development of natural herd behaviours, coupled with skilful and appropriate handling and training. Even if an alpaca begins to exhibit these behaviours, early intervention can be effective. It is best to seek advice on training methods that increase the likelihood of desired behaviours and reduce the frequency of unwanted behaviours.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A SUSPECTED 'BESERK' ALPACA

- Keep yourself safe.
- Employ behaviour management and reward based training strategies
- Take control, be the leader and teach your animal new skills.

1. KEEPING YOURSELF SAFE

Buy some panels² to make pens where you can feed and confine your problem alpaca, so that you can safely enter the field to poo pick or carry out training.

Make yourself seem bigger. Alpacas are more likely to be subservient to people larger than them, and tend to eye up and bully smaller people, so wear an imposing hat, a padded jacket, or hold your jacket above your head. You could use a broom handle stuffed down the back of your jacket with a hat or another jacket on top. Carry a dustbin lid when you go in, you can use this as a shield to protect yourself if it tries to barge, bite or rear. These precautions should help to make you seem much less of a pushover.

2. EMPLOY BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT AND REWARD BASED TRAINING STRATEGIES

If your alpaca is an uncastrated male, get him gelded. However, after gelding, testosterone levels can take several weeks to reach an insignificant level.

By the time people phone me for advice on these matters they have normally got to a confrontational stage with a history of unsuccessful attempts to dominate the alpaca. In my experience, confrontational methods rarely work, and can make things much worse. Fortunately, there are kinder, safer and more effective ways to retrain your alpaca.

Be specific about the problem; is it biting, barging or rearing? Your alpaca needs to learn that looking away is more worthwhile than biting, that respecting your personal space is better than barging and that keeping all four feet on the floor is more gratifying than rearing. You can do this by rewarding the behaviour you want and ignoring the behaviour (wherever possible) you don't want.

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BESERK MALES (AND FEMALES)

I suggest that you learn how to clicker train. Clicker training works mainly through positive reinforcement. Studies show that animals (including human animals) learn quickly and permanently through these methods.

- **Get a clicker** and start by working over the fence from your alpaca or whilst it is in a pen. Alexandra Kurland³ who clicker trains horses calls this 'protective contact'.
- **Find some yummy food** that it really likes and have 20-30 small pieces of food. I find that pony nuts are usually very well received, plus they are low value, i.e. not fattening. However, I recently worked with a very aggressive alpaca that was exceptionally partial to guinea pig treats!
- **Part of safe handling** is to deliver the food on something that gives you a bit of distance from the animal and protects you from being bitten. I use a large frisbee (the rim keeps the food on) to deliver the food. Hide it behind your back at all times except when using it to deliver the reward.
- **First, the alpaca needs to learn** that the click means that it is going to get a treat. This is known as loading the clicker. Click (once) and then feed one treat. Repeat 5-10 times or more if necessary until you can see that when you click it looks for the food.

Once your alpaca has learned that a click signals a treat, you can begin training it to behave better. Working from behind the protection of a fence or pen, start by training it to turn its head away from you, because if it is thinking of biting, rearing or barging, it will start by looking straight at you, whereas if its head is at a right angle to you, it will not.

Every time it glances away again from you, click and treat. Reinforce this behaviour by feeding one treat after every click (even if you messed up the timing). The click is not the reward, but it will 'mark' (pinpoint) the preferred behaviour, so perfecting the timing of your click is key here - the timing of the delivery of the food, less so. Make sure you feed where you want your alpaca's head to be. You will probably need to progressively 'shape' (train) the preferred behaviour by marking and rewarding even the smallest head movement away from you. Don't over-train; aim for a set of 20 repetitions, quit while you are ahead and leave it wanting more.

To hone your clicker training skills, you could practice training a family member or pet to do a specific task. For example; I've trained some of my alpacas to stand still while I put a pack on them, my dogs to get into their beds, and my pigs to sit on command. You can find some great examples of clicker training many different species on YouTube!

CONCLUSION

By working in this way you should get an alpaca who will 'offer' to turn his head away from you when you approach him, and also stop him mugging you for treats. In the next article we will discuss part three, (taking control, being the leader and teaching your alpaca new skills) including the next steps of haltering, working in the field, leading and building on your newly opened channels of communication.

To learn more about clicker training, I recommend anything by Karen Pryor⁴ who is the doyenne of clicker training. 🐾

CASE STUDY

Marvel was one of the most aggressive alpacas I've had to work with. He lived with two other alpacas but had very little to do with them. He was constantly 'on guard'; watching for anyone who might try to approach 'his fence', so that whenever anyone walked near it, he would race over, rear up and try to bite them over the fence. He'd had years of practice and was very fast and determined.

Because there was no pen in his field, I started by working with him with the fence between us. Fortunately he was more interested in the treats than biting me, and it only took about five minutes before he was consistently keeping his face parallel with the fence (and not over it). I then progressed to walking up to the fence, and each time he looked away (and kept his feet on the floor!) he got clicked and rewarded. I then taught his handlers how to click and treat the 'look away' whenever they approached the fence. We took a break and found some pens. Under cover of dustbin lids they were assembled, and feeders added. We then fed Marvel in the pen and shut him inside it, so we could train him (still using protective contact) in his field. Then we clicked and treated on all sides of the pen when his head was turned away.



1



2



3



4

1. Loading the clicker – keeping the food hidden, click...
2. ...and treat
3. Wait for the behaviour you want... then click
4. ...and treat. Feed where you want your alpaca's head to be!

To learn more about CamelidSense training, courses and articles please see my website www.carthveanalpacas.com or contact me by email taylor.browne@clara.net

Notes:

1. McGee Bennett, M. *The Camelid Companion* (2nd ed). Zephyr Farm Press, 2006
2. See my previous articles on www.carthveanalpacas.com
3. www.theclickercenter.com
4. E.g. Pryor, K. *Don't Shoot the Dog*. Ringpress Books, 2009