

A farm yarn: Fill-in farmers get a knack for lovable, prankish alpaca

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Mark and Corey LaFlamme spent a weekend minding a Waldoboro alpaca farm for Terry and Bonnie Callery; that involves shoveling poop, dispensing food and water and trying to keep one step ahead of the mischievous critters.

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At Village Farm Alpacas in Waldoboro, there are many gates.

There's a gate holding in the males of the herd. There's a gate that keeps the females in one place and a gate that separates the two groups.

There's a gate on one side of the barn and one on the other. There are gates everywhere you turn and, to get to them, you have to go through a gate.

I'm very paranoid about the gates. Leave one open, and who knows how many alpacas will slip through and where they will go. I'm so wary about it, I sometimes freeze up, checking the latches once, twice, three times before I dare move on to the next chore.

Clearly, I'm being overcautious.

"There are three things you've got to remember," says Bonnie Callery, who operates the farm with her husband, Terence. "Check the gate, check the gate and check the gate."

So, it's not just me. Prized for their soft coats and impish charms, alpacas are actually quite crafty. Like puckish pre-teens, you've got to watch them.



Clapton

Over the course of three days in November, I watched them plenty. I shoveled their poop into a wheel barrow. I filled their bowls with feed and then sprinted away before they came charging into the barn like inmates in the prison cafeteria. I swept up after them, kept them hooked up with hay and made sure their water was fresh and unfrozen.

Taking care of alpacas is hard work.

Or it's easy as pie. I have no real way to know. Unless you count petting strange dogs and befriending rodents, I have no experience with which to draw comparisons.



Slippers made of alpaca fiber keep the feet warm in winter, cool in summer because of the fiber

Not that I'm the only alpaca rube in the world. Although there are more than 70 alpaca farms in Maine now, the majority of the people doing the farming aren't what you'd call seasoned veterans. Mostly, they're educated professionals looking to get closer to nature. Or possibly, to find an extra means of income.

"Most people who raise them haven't raised livestock before," says Robin Fowler, president of the Maine Alpaca Association. "This isn't usually 40 or 50 years of family farming tradition. This is new."



Corey LaFlamme and Sophia enjoy some bonding time.

The Callerys fit that image nicely. Terry comes from a sales and marketing background. Bonnie has had a career as a medical buyer. Together, they've been running the alpaca farm since 1999, raising them, breeding them, making and selling products out of the precious alpaca fleece. Bonnie spins and weaves the luxurious fiber. They teach others the lifestyle. They go to all the shows.

The Callerys are all in.

"For us, it has been an exciting project that we have undertaken together," the Callerys write on their website, alpacavillage.com. "It has been a good experience for us as a couple to have adopted this richly rewarding lifestyle. Our alpacas provided us with so many things - a way to build equity and income, a daily rhythm on the farm that centers us."

The perfect insulator

Tucked between their sprawling farmhouse and the acres of land where the alpacas roam, the Callerys keep a tiny shop filled with things made of fiber. There are sweaters and scarfs, shawls and blankets, slippers and socks.

Half the weight of sheep's wool, alpaca fiber is also four times warmer. It's as close to a perfect insulator as you'll find and doesn't contain greasy lanolin, like sheep. I know a handsome young man who has a pair of slippers from the Callerys' shop, and man, are they comfortable.

But it wasn't footwear I was after on my three-day field trip, it was that "daily rhythm" action of which the Callerys speak. A classic late sleeper and general layabout, I'm curious about the rugged ways of farming. I've got questions. So many questions about the enigmatic animal I know almost nothing about.

And the most pressing of them all came to me within moments among the herd: Is it me? Or are the 29 alpacas of Village Farm quietly making fun of me?

Turns out that wasn't just my own low self-esteem at work.

"They know you're not the same person," says Fowler. "You're like the substitute teacher and they'll try to mess you up. It's really funny. They know that it's something new – that it's not the same routine."

For three days, the alpacas watched my every move. They always seemed to be at my heels. But whenever I'd spin around to confront them, they'd look away, pretending to be doing something else. I got the feeling they'd whistle if they knew how. *Nope. Nothing going on here.*

"I really think of them as a lot like cats as far as personality goes," says Fowler. "They're very independent and curious. They have tremendous memories and family bonds for life. It's amazing to see how intelligent they are. If you have a mom that loses a baby, she will grieve for months, if not longer. The rest of the herd will support her, sit with her, spend time with her."

Low maintenance

Before they loaded four of their animals into a special trailer and headed to Massachusetts, Bonnie and Terry Callery gave my wife and me the rundown. It's nothing too complicated, really. Sprinkle the food with a nutritious powder and feed twice a day. Make sure there's ample hay and water. Clean up the poop and throw down some lime to ward off the worst of the odors.

Even the cleaning of alpaca poop isn't very strenuous or revolting. The animals tend to keep to one spot for such business so you don't have to chase their waste all over the farm. They're small round balls that surrender to the shovel without a fight.

"If the animals have a neat, well-maintained area," Fowler says, "they'll keep it tidy."

The Callerys keep their farm neat and efficient, all right. Which meant that wife Corey and I had to just sweep through three times a day, filling bowls and filling water buckets. We probably put in four hours each day, all told. Which isn't bad, Fowler says, for newbies. A pro like her spends two hours a day taking care of her 27 animals.

It doesn't have to be hard, this alpaca farming. It doesn't have to be expensive, either. Done right, it costs around \$200 a year to care for one alpaca, as long as it stays healthy.

So, how much does it cost to get into the business? It depends, says Fowler. The animals themselves can cost as little as \$500 or as much as \$50,000. Some alpaca farmers have just a few animals, others have full herds.

Some alpaca farmers treat their animals like pets, while others maintain a business-only relationship like any farmer with a herd of cows or sheep.

"The way people raise alpacas are as varied as the way they raise kids," says Fowler. "It depends on what your objectives are."

For many, the objective is moolah, and the soft alpaca fiber bringing in that moolah is only becoming more prized as more people discover what it can do. Even so, Fowler says she knows some alpaca farmers who don't do anything at all with the fiber.

"To me," Fowler says, "that's like a dairy farmer not doing anything with the milk from his cows."

Falling in love

At [Northern Solstice Alpaca Farm](#) in Unity – which happens to be the [Alpaca Center of New England](#) – Fowler is in the thick of things, alpaca-wise. The center offers guided tours and hosts seminars to educate future and current alpaca farmers.

Her advice to those thinking about getting into the alpaca game? Don't quit your day job. Not just yet.

"I always encourage people to take it on as a hobby," Fowler says. "One that you hope will become profitable."

The toughest thing for me was the gates. But by the end of the weekend, the total number of escaped alpacas was zero. They made fun of me and took advantage of my naivete, but the alpacas of Village Farm caused me no real stress.

Corey sold a few items in the shop (located just off Route 1, the Callerys' farm has no problem drawing visitors) and I scored a pair of slippers. Job done and a little farming experience to write about in my diary.

A funny thing, though. After I left the farm, I found that I missed the alpacas and their prankish ways. They spooked and befuddled me, and they messed with my head, but at the end of the day, those beasts were OK to be around.

"They love to play," says Fowler. "These are some of the most calming animals on the planet. How do you not fall in love?"

Alpacawhatnow?

Alpacas are kept in herds that graze on the level heights of the Andes of Ecuador, southern Peru, northern Bolivia, and northern Chile. Alpacas are considerably smaller than llamas, and unlike llamas, alpacas are not used as beasts of burden but are valued only for their fiber. Alpaca fiber is used for making knitted and woven items, much as sheep's wool is. These items include blankets, sweaters, hats, gloves, scarves, a wide variety of textiles and ponchos in South America, and sweaters, socks, coats and bedding in other parts of the world. The fiber comes in more than 52 natural colors as classified in Peru, 12 as classified in Australia and 16 as classified in the United States. Alpacas and llamas differ in that alpacas have straight ears and llamas have banana-shaped ears. Aside from these differences, llamas are on average 1–2 feet taller and proportionally bigger than alpacas.

Alpacas have been domesticated for thousands of years. In fact, the Moche people of Northern Peru often used Alpaca images in their art. There are no wild alpacas.

Alpacas are social herd animals that live in family groups consisting of a territorial alpha male, females and their young. They are gentle, elegant, inquisitive, intelligent and observant. As they are a prey animal, they are cautious and nervous if they feel threatened. They like having their own space and may not like an unfamiliar alpaca or human getting close, especially from behind. They warn the herd about intruders by making sharp, noisy inhalations that sound like a high pitch burro bray.

Source: Alpaca Academy, arilist.com/academy

70 plus: Number of alpaca farms in Maine

6: Alpaca farms in Androscoggin County

250,000: Number of alpacas in the United States

\$200: Estimated cost to care for one alpaca for a year

Source: Maine Alpaca Association

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