

#8 Herd Protectors

Like all camelids, alpacas are hardy, intelligent animals that have evolved with strong herd social instincts. Both females and males are very protective of each other and especially of their young.

The alpaca is generally very alert to any animal or person approaching its paddock and has excellent eyesight over kilometre distances. While normally almost soundless, the alpaca can emit a piercing alarm scream when aroused to potential danger, alerting their herd and property owners.

Alpacas are normally gentle toward humans and other animals that are not seen as threatening but they have an innate dislike for canines and foxes. Their defence against such predators is to chase them away or pursue them and if necessary, stamp at or on the predator with their front feet, rising off the ground onto their back legs if necessary before bringing their front legs down with considerable speed and force. Alpacas, when provoked in such a fashion, are very fast and will catch the predator in a short distance. There is also evidence that alpacas may deter attacks from eagles.

The instinct for one or two alpacas to bond with other grazing animal herds, and especially their proven ability to protect sheep and goats, has resulted in the growing use of wethered adult male alpacas as sheep flock guardians – especially during and after lambing and kidding. Cases have been recorded in Australia of wethers bravely standing in front of females and progeny in the corner of a paddock fending off multiple animal attacks. In some cases, a guardian has been killed by dogs while at least some of his flock survived.

Alpacas used as guardians for lambing ewe and breeding goat flocks should be fully grown castrated males [wethers] at least 18 months to two years old or infertile females. Although entire males are equally capable as guardians, it is not recommended to use them as they will fight with each other and may injure other livestock by attempting to mate them.

Many sheep breeders have reported their best-ever lambing percentages following the introduction of guardian alpacas.

The number of alpaca wethers required depend on several factors, including the individual alpaca (two or three alpacas are often used together– all will bond well with the host flock), size of the paddock, number of animals to be guarded and the layout and terrain of the farm. If several alpacas are kept together they may spend more time in each other's company, however, some farmers report success in running up to six guardian alpacas with very large lambing ewe flocks for added protection against eagle and crow attacks, as well as wild dogs and foxes.

The alpaca ideally should be introduced to the pregnant ewe flock about 4-6 weeks before lambing to allow time for bonding. However it is never too late to introduce a guardian alpaca to a flock - even after lambing or kidding has begun. After initially patrolling the paddock boundary, the guardians will soon remain close to the flock for companionship and will normally protect them from predators. A single guardian has sometimes been seen 'minding' a group of young lambs while the mothers spread out to feed.

Guardian alpacas can be readily moved around the property with their accompanying flocks, using dogs as required. Normal care, however, is needed to control dogs in their vicinity, especially in yards.

Disclaimer: This advice is of a general nature. Seek veterinary or expert advice for your circumstances.

They will thrive on normal sheep pasture and will tend to be overweight when run with breeding ewes, so they should be kept separately or with dry sheep outside the lambing season.

With normal husbandry, guardian alpacas should remain active and useful for at least 15 years, aided by lower teeth that grow to replace wear. Alpacas need to be shorn annually, and this is best done after all sheep have been shorn. To avoid any risk of contamination from close contact, alpacas should be separated from sheep flocks before they are yarded, and preferably 8 weeks before shearing. AWEX (Australian Wool Exchange) quality control staff are comfortable with alpacas being run with sheep, and accept them being shorn in shearing sheds, preferably last after a normal cleanup.



Disclaimer: *The advice given here is of a general nature. More detailed information for your area may be provided by an agronomist, veterinarian or other expert with local knowledge.*

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