

Catching and Handling Llamas and Alpacas

prepared by the National Llama Intervention & Rescue Coordination Council (IRC Council)

Animal control and animal welfare authorities are sometimes called upon to remove llamas and alpacas from situations where their welfare is compromised or to capture loose animals when their presence is a hazard to traffic safety. Learning a bit about camelid behavior will help make catching and handling them easier and less traumatic for all concerned.*

Local Help

Many llama and alpaca owners are willing to help catch, halter and transport llamas and alpacas in need of rescue, re-homing or capture. They are used to the behaviors and motivations of such animals, which differ from other livestock in a number of ways, and can be of great help to animal control and welfare authorities. Most states have one or more llama and alpaca organizations that maintain a membership list with contact information. Ideally, local animal control authorities should have one or two names from their area llama and alpaca community they could contact to request help or advice for specific situations involving camelids. It would be good to have this information ahead of time and establish a working relationship before help is actually needed.

If you do not have contact information for local camelid owners, you can contact one of the regional coordinators for the National Llama Intervention & Rescue Coordination Council (IRC Council) who will be able to provide advice, camelid contacts and even halters and leads if needed. They include: Northwest, Charlene Schmidt (509-722-5466, charlene@prosperitypal.com); West, Jan Sherrill (805-238-2628, pacamom@lightspeed.net); Rocky Mountain Area, Olin Allen (970-493-2886, olinallen@earthlink.net); Midwest, Sheila Fugina (715-246-5837, bsfugina@frontier.com); Southeast, Susan Ravan (sdravan@gmail.com); South Central, Sandra Reynolds (580-745-9202, lonestarranchoktx@gmail.com); and Northeast, Marc Page (978-724-3273, home; 508-246-0424, weekdays 8 to 4; sputtermill@hughes.net).

Catching

Though they are among the earliest domesticated animals and generally very comfortable around humans, llamas and alpacas are very intelligent and intuitive; if they feel threatened or afraid, their first response is flight. Avoid pushing or panicking them into the flight mode. Slow, calm, confident movements are key to keeping them interested and engaged rather than suspicious and wary. Many of the llamas and alpacas involved in rescue situations may not be used to being handled or haltered, but there are ways to move them, contain them and transport them without always needing to halter each one. Above all, remain calm and be flexible.

Make the site work for you. Preview the site ahead of time if possible to determine your catching and loading options. If you are not able to assess the site before you need to move the animals, do so as soon as you arrive. Determine where and how secure the boundaries are (fences, buildings, etc.) and where you want the animals to end up for loading. See if there are materials on site that may be used to help contain animals—cattle panels, portable panels or gates—items that you can move where you need them. If you've had a chance to see the site ahead of time, you have the opportunity to bring needed materials and equipment.

Funnel the animals. Even llamas and alpacas in a large open field can be moved in the direction you need them to go by funneling them into increasingly smaller areas. You can use a variety of visual barriers to help you herd the animals—a human chain (slow and calm), lightweight poles extended horizontally, a rope held between two people. Camelids don't like being separated from their herdmates so it is important to keep them together. They also cue off one another so be alert to potential jumping or breaking away. This behavior can also work in your favor if the lead animal or two are headed where you want the group to go. If you are dealing with a single animal in a large space, another llama or two can be used as "bait". This is when it's especially helpful to know a local llama or alpaca owner.

Do not use the following strategies. Do not use dogs to herd llamas and alpacas. Camelids usually view a strange dog as a predator and will flee rather than be herded. Do not try to herd llamas and alpacas on horseback. They often feel like they are being chased and will be pushed into the flight mode and become almost impossible to catch. Do not try to rope or lasso a llama or alpaca. You may cause serious injury or snap a neck. Do not chase llamas and alpacas or get so close they feel forced to flee or jump rather than be herded.

Contain the animals. By herding the llamas or alpacas into increasingly smaller spaces, you can contain them in a safe space either for haltering or for herding into a trailer without haltering them. There may already be corrals or catch pens at the site into which you can herd the animals. If not, you can create temporary catch pens with portable panels and the sides of buildings or trailers. When you are catching camelids in a smaller space, one person needs to be in charge and directing the others where to go and what to do so you are not at cross purposes. Encircle the animals in a non-threatening manner as you continue to make the circle smaller until the animals are able to be caught.

Watch for aggressive behavior. Some llamas and alpacas have not learned to respect a human's space. Though not common, if you come upon a llama that rushes the fence toward people, screams or has a history of biting or jumping on people, contact one of the regional IRC Council coordinators for help. It is usually intact males who have been over handled when young that exhibit this abnormal behavior, and they require special handling by a knowledgeable camelid person.

Handling

Load the animals. If the animals are used to being haltered, or knowledgeable camelid owner help is available, you may be able to halter the llamas and alpacas and then load them into a trailer. If they are not used to being haltered, or no halters are available, you can use the same funneling technique already mentioned to direct them into a trailer. An open trailer can be used as the fourth side of a catch pen. By shifting panels and making the catch pen smaller, the animals can be moved closer and closer to the open trailer and will often jump in on their own.

If they don't jump in, alpacas and small llamas can be physically lifted and put into the trailer. With larger llamas, if their front legs are lifted into the trailer, they often will jump in the rest of the way, especially if you keep a panel directly behind them and don't give them room to back up. Llamas sometimes lock their legs and lean back, sliding their front feet under the trailer, so use care not to injure their front legs. Llamas and alpacas often can be transported in vans (even mini vans), especially if you are dealing with only a few animals. Remove the back seats of the van and cover any holes or metal hardware on the floor with old carpet.

Transport the animals safely. Never tie llamas or alpacas when transporting them. Camelids usually lie down when being transported and they can suffer severe injury or death if tied. Properly fitted halters should fit snugly behind the head, and the noseband should ride high on the nose just under the eyes. If the noseband slides down onto the soft cartilage of the nose it can cut off breathing. The noseband fit should also allow for chewing. Do not leave halters on llamas and alpacas when they are released to their living environment.

Get as much information as possible. If the llamas or alpacas are being moved and re-homed, try to get health records and any registration information or papers. These records will be very helpful in dealing with the animals' future needs and placement.

*Definition

The word "lama" is used when referring to the South American "camelid" family that includes both "llamas" and "alpacas" (as well as the wild guanacos and vicunas). "Llama" is used when referring to the specific species, the llama. When we use the word "lama" in the U.S., we are usually referring to the two domesticated species, the llama and the alpaca. We also often use the word "camelid" to refer to llamas and alpacas together.