

And Not Just Any Llama Will Do...

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Over the seven years of our alpaca business career we have had our herd tended (and our lives enriched) by seven llamas.

Our first guard llama was "Kelso." Dirty, white, old, and homely with a bad bite, knock-knees, and matted fleece. Kelso was a retired sheep-guard, a free-to-good-home llama that we found in the local newspaper.

We were commuting from the city to our new alpaca ranch in the country every weekend and we had arranged for a neighbor to check our small herd during the week. So far all had gone well, but we had read about guard llamas and had been thinking about looking for one as an extra level of security. No guard llama can, or should, be expected to provide "do it all" security, but the testimonials we had read made it clear that a true guard llama helps.

Late one night we saw the ad in the "free" column of the local paper. We made that phone call. Little did we know how our lives would change. For all that he wasn't, Kelso could guard. Kelso knew where all the gates were and always positioned himself between the herd and the gate. He would stand at the gate, bobbing his head as each alpaca passed. He knew where each of his alpaca charges were at all times.

When our herd expanded to a second pasture, we found ourselves looking for a second llama. We were coming back from a "hay run" and picked up a hitch-hiker, mentioning that the hay was for alpacas and llamas. Two days later, "Pluto" found us.

Pluto was everything Kelso wasn't. Pluto was a young llama, coal black, a magnificent fellow. His confirmation and bite were perfect. His fiber was splendid. He had presence. We pictured him towering over our herd. However, Pluto had other ideas. He was just a young fellow, a weanling, and he thought he was one of the alpacas. He had been misrepresented to us as a "guard llama." Instead, Pluto raced around the pasture playing with our alpaca yearling males. It soon became clear that Pluto didn't have a clue about guarding. He was far too young and had not been properly socialized with llamas and the species he was to guard. With regret we found Pluto a home with a 4-H family.

Next came "Juneau." Juneau was a mature gelding from a local llama breeder. He came to be gelded due to a heart murmur. He was majestic . . . he was steely gray and towered over our alpacas just as we

envisioned our llama guard would. Workmen building our house would ask "is it safe to go in." We owe Juneau a lot. He saved our alpacas on several occasions.

The first was when a workman left the gate open. The vet, coming for an early-hour farm visit, said "by the way your gate's open." I went running down the drive. They were GONE. All the lady alpacas and their babies were GONE. ALL GONE. EVERY LAST ONE --- GONE!!! My entire 401k-on-Four-Legs as my husband calls them was GONE!!! We live on a busy main road and I feared the worst. Then I heard a noise. There, in a small dead-end space behind the barn were all the ladies and babies. And, THERE, out in front of them, was Juneau. Every time one of them tried to leave the space, he chased them back.

Another time, I awoke one morning to find Juneau standing with his face against the bedroom window "alarm calling." I hurried over to the window to find two newly weaned female alpacas stuck in the electric fence. Thanks to Juneau's alarm, they recovered.

Our alpaca herd grew. We needed another llama. Soon we had "Ajax." Ajax's family was parting with him because they needed his pasture for draft horses. All they wanted was a good home for him. Ajax was a small stature, heavy wool double-coated llama. What he lacked in fleece he made up in personality. He was extraordinary. He charmed all visitors by trotting right up to the fence and "kissing."

Ajax became something of a local tourist attraction and people would bring their visitors for "llama kisses." Everyone knew Ajax's name. The UPS man would stop with treats for him. Ajax was what is called a PR llama. But the very traits that made Ajax so endearing prevented him from being a good guard llama. The best guard llamas are wary of people and always a little aloof, watching over things. Eventually, it became clear that Ajax preferred to be at the front gate greeting tourists while his alpaca charges were an acre away in the pasture . . . I found Ajax a little girl to live with.

Next, DIASTER STRUCK. I came out one morning to find a still grey shape in the corner of one of our shelters. Our beloved Juneau had had a heart-attack. Nothing could make us feel better. Llamas all have very individual personalities. Losing a llama is like losing a beloved friend. Each one is unique and special. We were heart-broken. What to do. We missed Juneau so much that for a brief time we considered giving up our alpacas.

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About then, came "Sinbad." Sinbad is, as quite a few fellow alpaca breeders have told us, a "WAY-COOL LLAMA". Sinbad is 384 pounds and worth every ounce in gold. He earns his keep every day and we will never part with Sinbad (although we have had quite a few offers for him).

Sinbad had been trained as an alpaca guard llama, raised with alpacas and had experience guarding in some pretty remote country. He was properly socialized with llamas and bonded to the species he guards. Initially, we put Sinbad to work guarding our alpaca studs. He immediately took charge. The boys' fighting stopped. And that was that.

Soon, we switched paddocks around and Sinbad was put to work guarding the pregnant lady alpacas and those with babies. It was interesting to watch Sinbad come into that group. For about a week, every time we went to the pasture we found Sinbad sitting with a different female alpaca. It was like he was making an effort to get to know each of his charges. It reminded me of a newly transferred midlevel corporate manager, taking a different employee to lunch every day. "And tell me about your goals."

The lady alpacas go up to the pasture during the day and down to the paddock at night. Previously, I would need to go out and chase them down. About the fourth day after moving Sinbad in with them, I went out to get them and found that Sinbad had them all rounded up and waiting at the gate. It's been that way ever since. Soon, we noticed something else. The lady alpacas were all pooping neatly in a pile. Yep. Every one of them --- Sinbad runs a "tight ship." Herd management got much easier with Sinbad in the pasture.

Then, there was the "DAY THE DOGS CAME." I had wondered from time to time what the guard llamas would really do if we were "under attack." Now I know.

I was two pens over when a large dog somehow cleared our fence jumped into the laneway. Before I could open two gates, Sinbad had the herd behind him in the back corner of the pen and was positioned out in front, poised to trample the intruder. I don't know WHAT he said to those lady 'pacas, but they just MELTED INSTANTLY BEHIND HIM. This encounter passed uneventfully but left me convinced I never wanted to be without a guard llama in every pasture.

As time went on, and our herd grew more, we were fortunate to be able to obtain two more experienced alpaca guard llamas from the same farm that sold us Sinbad. First, came Zorro, a tall mellow Bolivian llama that's as gentle as they come. He guards our weanling alpacas. Then came Gusto, a gorgeous 18-micron true black suri llama. He guards our yearlings. Now we rest easy at night. I look down at the pastures in the moonlight and if I see all those tall llama shapes standing there, I know all is well. We have guard llamas on duty . . . and not just any llama will do.