

# Small Herds

## *A boy and a girl*

**CAMELID HEALTH**  
information from the camelid community

Many people new to alpaca or llama ownership elect to go for the smallest possible herd size - and that includes some wishing to breed, who take home just one male and one female. Furthermore, they usually plan to let these two animals live together in what is hoped to be an idyllic setting involving green grass and bouncing cria. This romantic notion is far from the truth. Buying a male and a female and putting them together in a paddock is a terrible plan that may well result in tragedy for both owners and animals.

"But males and females living together is completely natural!" This is one of the more common arguments used to justify the 'boy and girl' plan, but it is wrong for two reasons.

**Alpacas and Llamas are not wild –**  
Both alpacas and llamas are domesticated species; they are not wild animals. Thousands of years of selective breeding has changed their behaviour patterns.

**Fenced paddocks are unnatural –**  
Unless your paddock is at least 50,000 acres, then the environment is totally different to the one where guanaco and vicuna - the wild antecedents of the llama and alpaca - evolved. In a small fence-bound paddock females have no opportunity to escape an overly aggressive or amorous male, and the normal social dynamics of animals on the altiplano cannot be expressed.

**In the wrong circumstances intact males can become dangerous.**

The danger in the cohabitation arrangement arises from the male. With none of the social limitations inherent in the natural environment, and a hormone system raging with testosterone, the male can and will embark on very dangerous patterns of behavior, including:

**Over-mating females –**  
This could be consensual in a highly-receptive or submissive female, or it can become rape in situations where a reluctant female cannot escape. Repeated matings can cause uterine damage and infections (leading to infertility), or can physically batter the female, up to the point of broken bones. Just because you don't see lots of forced matings or other abusive behaviour doesn't mean it isn't happening.

**Mating females at inopportune times –**  
Males (including some castrated males, depending on their temperament and level of excitement/arousal) will mate females while they are giving birth, a phenomenon that has been repeatedly observed. This is obviously very dangerous both to the mother and to the being-born cria (which could well be crushed and killed).

**Mating females too early –**  
Males are not always very discriminating when the testosterone starts flowing and they are seeking a mating. They may attempt to mount very young cria, crushing them; they will also try to mate older, 'adolescent' cria. In Australia there was a case of a 14 month old female giving birth after having been mated at just three months of age.

**Inbreeding –**  
A male will, if left together with them, eventually mate his daughters and grand-daughters; sons will mount and mate their mothers when old enough (which may be as young as 8 months). Either scenario risks genetic misfortune.

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### ***Heightened aggression –***

Males left in with females for an extended period can also grow increasingly aggressive. Usually this aggression is directed towards other male alpacas or llamas – which can lead to vicious attacks on young males when they get old enough to be perceived as rivals. Adult males grow fighting teeth which are capable of inflicting grievous wounds; their violence is not ‘play fighting’, but an attempt to maim or even kill - a real fight that an adult male will always win against a weanling who has nowhere to run.

This aggression can also spill over to target humans. Male alpacas are smart, and they know how to fight. They know where a human is looking, and when he or she is or is not paying attention. The first indication of a problem could be when a 75-90kg alpaca or 150kg llama male charges at full speed from behind, knocks someone to the ground and starts trampling. Once the male has reached this level of aggression he will be very hard to ‘fix’. A person trampled in such a manner may also be hard to repair.

### **A better alternative - a boy and two girls! (and two or more paddocks)**

In this scenario we start with three animals, not two. This is not such a big difference, because if we were purchasing a male and a female for breeding purposes anyway, then our herd was destined to grow. (And if three animals is too much, why would anyone buy a pair, with intentions to breed, in the first place?) The females are kept in one paddock, while the male is kept in a separate paddock within sight of the girls. This fulfills the minimum social requirements for the animals (although the male would probably enjoy the companionship of another male, if possible). Two paddocks is obviously the minimum here, but having three paddocks would have the advantage of allowing some of the pasture to be rested so it can naturally regenerate.

When the time comes for mating, the male is placed in the paddock with the females for 3 weeks (a so-called ‘paddock mating’) and then returned to his own space. The next year, after the cria are born, the male can be put back in the paddock again for 3 weeks (he shouldn't be excessively aggressive, as he hasn't been living with females continuously); or alternatively, the male and females can be 'pen mated', where they are joined in a small pen (with the cria excluded) and then put back in their respective paddocks after the mating.

In this set-up young males can, at time of weaning, be moved in with the adult male, although some care should be taken to ensure that the adult doesn't excessively bully or threaten the youngster. Female cria are either weaned into the third paddock or left at their mothers foot (depending on circumstances).

### **Advocacy and Education**

Buyers who run a male and a female together do so with often benign intentions, but also ignorance. I hope that this reference card, and similar educational material, will help put a stop to the practice. Please distribute to any and all interested parties.

It is incumbent on all responsible breeders to educate potential buyers about the pitfalls of the 'male and female' plan, so that they don't just go on to find a seller who is more interested in the money, and does not care about the outcome for either the animals or the new owner.