

Alpacas' appeal: Not just fleece but also friendship

By Ann Cameron Siegal, The Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.25.17

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Sophia Lyantri with some of her recently shorn alpaca friends at the family's farm in Woodbine, Maryland. Alpacas are cousins of camels and llamas. Photo by: Ann Cameron Siegal.

After school, fifth-grader Sophia Lyantri can often be found hanging out with about 50 long-necked, adorable friends in Woodbine, Maryland. Sophia helps her family raise and care for alpacas.

Native to the Andes Mountains in South America, alpacas are domesticated camelids -- which means they are not wild. They are related to camels and llamas. Their fleece, a silky natural fiber usually lighter and less scratchy than sheep wool, is popular for clothing. In the spring, shearing -- a whole-body haircut -- helps alpacas stay cool during the summer.

One of Sophia's favorite tasks is carding (untangling) the fiber before her mother hand-spins it into yarn. Alpaca fiber comes in many beautiful natural colors ranging from pure white to black, as well as many shades of brown, beige and gray. But Sophia loves dyeing the fiber to make bright colors. Her family sells yarn, natural fiber and homemade alpaca products.

Alpacas are low-impact animals. When grazing, they eat just the tops of grass rather than pulling it up as cows do. Alpacas' soft two-toed, padded feet do less damage to the ground than horse hooves.

"Alpacas are not aggressive at all. They're very gentle," Sophia said. "The more time you spend with them, the friendlier they are." And they hum -- really! It's a sweet communication sound, but it reflects many emotions, such as being content, cautious or worried.

Sophia often gives tours of her family's farm. She is frequently asked whether alpacas spit.

"Only when they are stressed, and then usually they spit at each other," she said. She advises visitors to "stand quietly and let the animals come to you," cautioning that "they don't like having their heads touched. Stroke them gently on the neck or back."

"You can't have just one alpaca," said Brandon Tenney, 16, who helps his family raise alpacas in Catlett, Virginia. "They're very social animals." The Alpaca Owners Association notes, "Alpacas have very strong herding instincts and need the companionship of other alpacas to thrive."

"There's a leader in each pasture," Brandon said. Alpacas are very curious, so when something new comes near, the whole bunch will follow the leader. They often run together to get a better view, whether it's of a person or another animal.

Brandon, a high school junior, and his sister Danielle, 20, have been helping raise their family's alpacas for 11 years. The day starts at 5:30 a.m. Chores include feeding the 51 alpacas, cleaning their stalls and making sure there is plenty of water and hay available.

Danielle jokes that she schedules college classes around alpaca feeding times. She is studying to be a large-animal veterinarian -- one who takes care of horses, cows, llamas, alpacas, sheep, etc. She particularly loves newborn alpacas.

Brandon is tuned in to each alpaca's personality.

"They're all different," he said, noting that alpacas display emotions much as humans do. Around dusk, his family loves watching their alpacas engage in pronking -- a playful, bouncing run signifying a happy feeling.

When the day's work is done, Brandon says, "the payback is watching a baby alpaca being born and running around. That's enough reward for me."



Quiz

- 1 Which detail from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Native to the Andes Mountains in South America, alpacas are domesticated camelids — which means they are not wild.
 - (B) Alpaca fiber comes in many beautiful natural colors ranging from pure white to black, as well as many shades of brown, beige and gray.
 - (C) It's a sweet communication sound, but it reflects many emotions, such as being content, cautious or worried.
 - (D) Brandon, a high school junior, and his sister Danielle, 20, have been helping raise their family's alpacas for 11 years.
- 2 Which sentence BEST supports the main idea of paragraphs 2 through 3?
- (A) They are related to camels and llamas.
 - (B) In the spring, shearing — a whole-body haircut — helps alpacas stay cool during the summer.
 - (C) But Sophia loves dyeing the fiber to make bright colors.
 - (D) Her family sells yarn, natural fiber and homemade alpaca products.
- 3 Brandon Tenney would be most likely to agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Raising alpacas is a great investment for farmers.
 - (B) Raising alpacas is both hard work and rewarding.
 - (C) Raising alpacas is the first step to becoming a veterinarian.
 - (D) Raising alpacas is expensive as you have to provide food and water.
- 4 Which answer choice accurately characterizes Danielle Tenney's opinion of raising alpacas?
- (A) She thinks it is too much work for a college-age student.
 - (B) She thinks alpacas are stinky, messy animals.
 - (C) She thinks alpacas are similar to horses, cows and sheep.
 - (D) She thinks it will help prepare her for a future job.