



# sheep guards

Many alpaca breeders in the UK will be well aware of their alpacas' guarding abilities. They know which of their alpacas will be pro-active towards a perceived threat and which alpacas might actually take action against that threat. We hear of Australian sheep farmers whose alpacas chase away foxes, crows and birds of prey; take special care of newborn lambs and even lead sheep to safety during bush fires. They also stop dingoes and foxes from killing newborns during the birthing process. What is the truth behind these stories and are British farmers unnecessarily losing lambs to fox predation?

In this article, **Jenny MacHarg** from Fowberry Alpacas explores the truth behind these stories.

**SINCE 2002 IN SCOTLAND** and 2004 in England, there has been a ban on hunting foxes with hounds. Many feel that fox numbers have increased since this time with foxes having no natural predators left in the UK. Foxes will always look for an easy meal; a newborn lamb is an easy kill because sheep lack the temperament and stature needed to intimidate a fox. This is made worse with multiple births. The UK sheep farming industry produces around 300,000 tonnes of meat, representing 85% of the sheep meat eaten in the UK. It is the largest sheep industry in Europe, with 75,000 sheep producers and approximately 43 million sheep. Half of this

number are adults used for breeding and 17 million are lambs under one year old. The Burns Report (published June 2000) estimates that less than \*2% of otherwise viable lambs are killed by foxes in England and Wales. On the basis of current evidence, the Government does not consider foxes to be a significant factor in lamb mortality nationally. However, it does recognise that foxes can cause serious local problems to sheep farmers and free-range poultry interests.

\*Of the approximately 17 million lambs born annually, this equates to approximately 340,000 lambs lost to fox predation. Many farmers may choose to keep their newborn



Photograph: © Bonny Vale Alpacas

lambs safe inside after birth for longer than is healthy and at extra expense. What is needed is a way of deterring foxes in a meaningful manner. Enter the alpaca. Not only do alpacas make direct eye contact with a fox, they use team work and a united front to challenge foxes, actions which un-nerve them.

Debbie O'Neill from Signature Alpacas, New South Wales, Australia has these comments to make: "I would like to say that becoming owners of guard-alpacas ten years ago was part of a fairytale, but the raw truth is more like a Stephen King novel to begin with. We were losing up to ten lambs a night and that was only accounting for those that were left behind, not those that were 'takeaways' as is the foxes' habit. During one evening shooting my husband witnessed seven foxes working the sheep like a pack of dogs, circling them so that the lambs manoeuvred to the outside of the group could be taken by the nearest fox. The upshot of this was a lambing rate of 63%. Our first two wether alpacas spent the first month with us travelling the fence line, but with 400 acres needing to be patrolled, we sourced two more wethers to help. Before the ewes were due to lamb, the alpacas started camping with them at night. That season we lost eight lambs from fox attack. With the help of the boys, the lambing rate was 81% plus 7% hand reared lambs = 94%. Evidence suggests that alpacas not only bond with sheep, but that sheep bond with the alpacas. The ewes often form a nursery group around where the alpacas are camped under a tree in the middle of the day, so the boys get to play babysitter while the ewes go off to graze. The alpacas won't leave an area until all the lambs are with their mothers. On several occasions I have seen alpacas gently pushing a lamb up to its mum as she is walking away from the feeders, where the lamb has been asleep without realising that mum has finished

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and is heading off. A poor ewe won't get any time-out with these two paddock nannies on duty. The boys patrol the paddock during the day and will check out any new additions as they arrive, they also tend to hang around the vicinity of lambing ewes."

Debbie's thoughts on herd guards are that alpacas are intelligent and canny animals, but not all wethers make good herd guards; contrary to what one might think, some of the gentler animals make good guards, with some of the more aggressive natured animals less so. Alpacas are individuals with some working better in smaller numbers and some working really well in a group of up to six. The numbers of alpacas to run with ewes is dependent on the threat, whether it is a paddock with a lot of foxes around, hilly or well timbered terrain, or perhaps an eagle nest is close by. Wethers need to be in numbers where they can rest and sleep because they will run themselves to exhaustion looking after their ewes. At present, Debbie's 1200 ewes, run in groups of 400 to lamb and will have two wethers, but up to five, depending on the terrain/wildlife. The wethers need to go in with the ewes from a month to six weeks before lambing starts as the boys will check out the paddock, seeing

Photograph: © 'Everything is Permuted' Photography



where their fence lines are and picking out areas of threat and shelter. Debbie adds: "we choose to leave the wethers with the lambs at weaning time as they provide the new weanlings with security and make moving newly weaned lambs a breeze, i.e. they all tuck in behind their big mates and follow the wethers to water or into a new paddock as a flock. I always give a guarantee that my wethers work and also offer a lease to buy or return for the lambing/kidding season which is another good 'try before you buy' option. This is a good way to reduce the barriers to purchase for the sheep farmer."

Pam Davidson-Mahomed from Victoria, Australia recounts the story of her friend Bec's guard alpaca, Frank. "Frank proved to be so good as a guardian that there were no lamb losses except for those lost to natural causes and the ewes seemed more content even though foxes were still seen occasionally skirting the paddock. One morning, Bec happened to look out the kitchen window to see an awful sight. The 150 ewes and their

two-month old lambs were in a circle on the side of the hill and hovering just above them was a huge wedge-tailed eagle, a formidable predator with a wing-span up to seven feet and it was ready to strike. Where was Frank? At first Bec thought he must be lying down amongst the sheep, or was he dead? But no, suddenly Frank appeared at a gallop over the brow of the hill, scattering the sheep. The eagle was alarmed at this sudden appearance and began to attack his back. Frank screamed, far harder than being shorn and spat green defiantly over this huge predator. The eagle, obviously not expecting this 'big sheep' to retaliate, flew off complete with new green livery and a perfume to match. Bec was so relieved to see Frank unharmed that only then did she realise what an amazing scene she had witnessed. Needless to say, this outstanding sheep guard alpaca is not for sale at any price!"

Gail Dean from New South Wales recalls an incident with her two wethers, Hercules and Franz – "We were outside one day when we heard a great commotion. Hercules was on the ground and I thought he was having some kind of fit. His lips were rolled back and he was making a tremendous growling noise. On closer inspection it was revealed that he was lying across the top of our smallest calf, completely covering her with his

body. Meanwhile Franz was walking around in a very agitated state with teeth bared and also making a growling sound. Suddenly a wedge-tailed eagle took off from a nearby tree swooping close to the group but not game enough to get too near. Once the eagle had disappeared Hercules allowed the calf to get up and graze but he followed her very closely."

In the UK, alpaca breeders have stories of their alpacas chasing foxes but alpacas can and do kill foxes as well. Rachel Hebditch from Classical MileEnd Alpacas describes how an adult fox was found dead against the fence of a small field where her stud males lived. The fox looked extremely healthy, in good condition and with a shiny coat. Rachel explains that the field is badger fenced and the mesh on the fence is much too small to allow a fox through - she assumes the males must have cornered the fox and killed it. After a fox was killed in her alpacas' field, Celia Berry from Sodom Hall Alpacas had this to say: "When a fox (or strange dog) enters the field, one of our alpacas will give the alarm call and then they will advance on the fox, prancing and threatening. Usually this is sufficient to deter a fox – which expects its prey to run away – but if it is cornered the camelids will attack and kill it. The field in which we found the dead fox, had nursing mothers in it, and

to protect the crias they must have got the fox cornered against the fence and stamped it to death." Celia adds "A friend of ours who keeps two alpacas hasn't lost a single chicken, goose or duck in four years since she got them, although previously it was a regular occurrence."

It is known that mature adult females can make aggressive protectors as well as castrated boys, indeed, our smallest adult female here at Fowberry Alpacas, who happens to be in charge of her female herd of forty, will bounce across towards a fox, while emitting the classic high pitched shrill warning, but if she isn't being taken seriously by the fox, she sets off after it as fast as a greyhound, snaking her head and meaning business. Our tiny, feisty ball of fluff is relaxed and tolerant of the farm dog, but she and others are not only particularly vigilant with young cria around, they are also protective of their own field. They don't like trespassers and perhaps this is why we have seen foxes slinking along the ground on their bellies, trying not to be noticed - it doesn't work. From our experience, a sheep guard male should be an adult, castrated and is in his prime protecting years from around two and a half to three years old and they only get better and more experienced at their job, the older

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they get. Australian farmers expect around fifteen years of active service from guardians – not a bad return for a few hundred pounds. Therefore we always tell farmers that their working wethers, that will have done sterling work all spring and summer, deserve the protection of a simple shelter from the worst of the winter weather especially in the UK.

The following is testament to the effectiveness of alpaca sheep guards from Mr and Mrs J. Kinder, Hill Top Farm Partnership, Newark, Nottinghamshire, UK. "This next lambing season (2011) will be the third year that Hill Top Farm has used their flock of (wether) male alpacas to guard their youngest and most vulnerable lambs. Following a particularly difficult year when over thirty lambs were killed out in the fields by foxes it was decided to take an alternative approach. Ten male alpacas were purchased to act as guards and the next season only two lambs were lost as a direct result of foxes killing them when first born. This was particularly significant as the farm gamekeeper had indicated that the farm's four hundred acres had an increased amount of foxes prowling due to some deforestation of the neighbouring woods.

Hill Top have increased the amount of ewes in the last year and have purchased four more young male alpacas from Christina Metcalfe

of Moss Carr Lodge Alpacas in order that as each field of young lambs are released from the birthing barns they can have two 'guard' alpacas to watch over them. In the event of danger the alpacas emit their characteristic high pitched warning sound and because they spend the rest of the year grazing with the sheep they appear to develop a sense of 'ownership' over the ewes and their offspring. For a sheep farmer, alpacas are an ideal animal to have on site as their welfare can fall easily in line with that of the sheep throughout the year. Hill Top produces around a thousand lambs per year and with the average value of £55 per lamb the cost of the herd of alpacas is recouped within a few years and anyone who has seen how a young lamb is ripped apart by a fox will appreciate that this is a worthwhile way of trying to stop the killing."

The last word must go to Celia Berry who recalls an event with her alpacas. "We watched ours recently when someone walking a dog on the road stopped to talk to us. Two of the alpacas bustled up to the fence and stood there stamping alternate front feet until the dog was led away." Let's all work towards more of our noble alpacas 'bustling' about in farmers' lambing fields! ●

Thank you to all contributors to this article.

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Alpha Female Fowberry