

Alpaca Down

By Renee & Barry Prokop
Black Meadow Suris
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The first statement that ran through my head when one of our pregnant female alpacas collapsed was “don’t panic!” Don’t panic? That was the first action that I took! My wife and I were scared to death. We had been treating Nanda for a sinus infection that forced her to breathe through her mouth for the past couple of weeks. We thought that she was getting better. As soon as she collapsed, we knew that we were wrong. We rushed over to Nanda, cleared her airway of grass and tried to get her breathing again as she thrashed on the ground. Time was critical; and time was running out.

We learned many lessons that Saturday evening (the day before Easter Sunday) as we huddled by our gasping alpaca in the middle of a dung pile:

Were is the Phone? – When we bought the property over a year ago we noticed that it had a number of phone jacks down at the barn. It wasn’t until after we moved in that we realized that for whatever reason, they did not work. At some point we were going to figure out why they didn’t work. Consequently, we usually brought a cell phone down to the barn with us as we tended the alpacas. This time we didn’t so while Renee continued to rescue the alpaca; I make the one hundred yard dash to the house to find her cell phone. Since Renee is farm manager she is always available to call and to see the vet. As such, she had the vet’s number stored on her cell phone. We also had it saved in our AlpacaEase software program but during a crisis it would take too long to access it. It took two trips to the house in order for me to locate her cell phone. **LESSON LEARNED:** The following Monday, we called our local phone company to come out and figure out why the phone didn’t work at the barn. The phone company ended up having to run a new line between the house and the barn. Once the phone line was available the phone was programmed with the vet’s phone number. We will also have all of our cell phones programmed with the vet’s phone numbers in them. An alpaca’s life is certainly worth the time and cost to get easy and immediate phone access.

A Rolodex Of Veterinarians – Our crisis happened at the worst possible day and time as all crises seem to. We called and called our vet on both her office and cell numbers but received no answer. Our vet had always been there for us before but when we really needed her, she was nowhere to be found. We didn’t know how much longer we could keep Nanda breathing and really needed advice on what to do. Who else should we call? It was not like you could look up an alpaca vet in the yellow pages. We actually called a local vet and was put on hold and finally told: “We’re sorry. We don’t deal with alpacas. Any advice that we provide you might be a legal liability for us.” We then remembered that we had the name of another vet that had spoken at a recent alpaca meeting and lived in the area; so we called Dr. Karen Baum. Our luck finally turned when she answered the phone.

LESSON LEARNED: We needed to have a list of at least two to four vets that we could call when needed. We also needed to ensure that we had their contact information and emergency numbers. Also, what services they could provide in an emergency. We needed to print out driving directions to their clinics so that we could have that information handy if needed. Our other farm in Washington State indicated that they have this information in their car, barn, house, AlpacaEase, and notebook. You can never have it in too many places.

Veterinarian Hospitals – In extreme cases, you may have to take your alpaca to a veterinarian hospital. As with vets, you will need to get their contact information and directions. If you have the time it would also be a good idea to drive out to the hospital to be familiar with the route and the hospital location. Also, talk to your vet about where they recommend that you send your alpaca in an emergency. Have at least two or three locations selected because some hospitals are better in some alpaca ailments than others.

LESSON LEARNED: If we had to take our alpaca to Virginia Tech or Ohio State it would have taken valuable time to figure out directions and logistics. We needed to have them in place and available when they were needed. In fact, in a crisis situation, the chief concern is the welfare of the animal and if the logistics are not in place, it takes critical time away from getting the animal the necessary attention that it needs.

Transportation Strategy – We had always heard that in an emergency that we could pack the alpaca in the back of our Blazer and transport it to the vet. That was the plan and it is easier said than done. The trick is how to get a struggling, scared, 150 pound alpaca in the back of the Blazer. It was not something that Nanda was going to cooperate with us on. After two attempts at trying to get her in the back, we realized that we were creating more stress and little progress at a time when we needed to be on the road to the vet. We finally hooked up the trailer and loaded Nanda into it. While this was less than ideal because we could not monitor her condition, as we would have been able to in the Blazer, we figured that it was more important to get her to the vet than continue to struggle to get her in the Blazer.

LESSON LEARNED: We were lucky in that we had an alternative mode of transportation to get the alpaca to the vet. We bought a pony trailer about a month before to use at upcoming shows. We both practiced how to hook it up to the car and operate it. I also remembered complaining about having to learn how to hook it up and drive it since, I concluded, *“Renee would always be there to handle that”*. In this case, Renee led the animal to the trailer (since Nanda was more comfortable with her) while I maneuvered the car into place and hooked the trailer up to it. I am through complaining about learning. It was fortunate that we were able to trade off duties in order to move Nanda quickly to the trailer.

Alpaca Documentation – The computer that we have all our alpaca information on is located in the house while most of the work (weighing, medicating, vet visits, breeding, birthing) is conducted at the barn. Therefore, we created a notebook with all of the alpaca information in it. The notebook contains pictures of the alpacas, copy of the ARI certificate, microchip number, and most importantly their medical history. We created

sheets that we use to capture our medical information. As we fill out the sheets, they are entered into AlpacaEase. The book is kept up-to-date for quick reference as we manage the animals.

LESSON LEARNED: It was very easy to grab the notebook as we headed out the door and have all of the vital health information in one place to consult on the way to the vet. We will be adding an additional section to the notebook to cover vital contact information (vets and emergency contacts), directions, and hotel information.

Change of Clothes - Nanda collapsed in the middle of a dung pile and that is where we had to attend to her. All thoughts of staying neat and clean went right out the window. Once we had finally stabilized Nanda so that she was breathing again and standing, one of us rushed to the house to wash the dung pile from us while the other continued to talk to the vet and figure out next steps. If Nanda didn't look like she was stabilized, we probably would have just jumped in the car and taken off without getting cleaned up. While I know it sounds a little silly, neither one of us wanted to drive through the night covered in dung if we could avoid it.

LESSON LEARNED: A simple backpack complete with towel, bathroom supplies, baby wipes, and a change of clothes should be stashed in the trunk of the car. It can then be grabbed when needed without a waste of time and thought.

Emergency Contact to Cover the Farm – We were also lucky in the fact that both of us were there when Nanda went down. As Renee likes to kid me and say, “I know when a crisis will occur because you leave town on a business trip before it happens.” In this case, we worked together and were out the door pretty quickly. The challenge then became, who would take care of the farm in our absence? We didn't know if we were going to be back early the next morning or late in the day. We called Renee's sister, Mary, who has worked with horses for a number of years and she agreed to rush over. As it turned out, Mary and Renee traveled down to the vet while I kept watch on the farm.

LESSON LEARNED: As you will keep a list of vets and hospitals, you should also keep a list of willing farm sitters. While we were lucky and Mary was available and willing, our alternative was a contact that Renee knew that had a business farm sitting. These people's names and contact information should also go into the notebook.

Hotel Information & Numbers – Renee & Mary left the farm at 8:00 p.m. and drove about 4 hours to the vet. Talking to Karen and shuttling back and forth with blood samples to the hospital led long into the night. By that time it was 3:00 a.m. and they were exhausted. They drove around to find a place to get a little shut eye and stopped at a Holiday Inn Express. After the hotel front desk charged their credit card, the front desk realized that the manager had to authorize the room. They could not locate the manager so Renee asked for her money back. Holiday Inn indicated that they could not refund the charge without a manager's approval either. Renee and Mary left and went next door to a Best Western. After they got in the room Mary realized that the room had not been cleaned from the previous occupant. The bed was ruffled and dirty towels lay on the floor. At this point, they were so exhausted that they laid on top of the bed and

got a couple of hours of sleep. The good news was that they were not charged for the room but then had to go back to the Holiday Inn before they left town to get their refund. LESSON LEARNED: Most of this could have been avoided if we had the forethought to realize that we were going to be too tired to drive back regardless of the outcome and had called ahead to book a room. One should always plan for the worst and expect to stay overnight and at least have hotel numbers and their frequent stay numbers available. If you have identified veterinarian hospitals that you may need to use, also take the time to identify surrounding hotels that you may have to stay at while to determine ways to treat your animal.

Medical Kit – Even when not confronted with an emergency, a farm should always have a fully stocked medical kit. We use a toolbox that we bought from True Value Hardware and stocked it with all of the essential remedies for our alpacas. Since we didn't know what we would need and how the travel would affect the alpaca we took the medical kit along with us. The trade-off was that since we did not have two medical kits, the alpacas left on the farm were without a medical kit for a day. LESSON LEARNED: We now have two medical kits. One that is used on a day-to-day basis and another that can be used for emergencies. It is a subset of the first kit and has the essentials in it that might be needed on the road or at shows.

Nanda lived and did a significant part of her recovery down at Dr Baum's clinic. The rest of the recovery required a lot of time, love, and attention from Renee over a three month period. At the time of this writing we are proud to note that Nanda gave birth to a healthy and normal female cria and is starting to enjoy her time as a mother and not a patient.

We did some good and some not so good steps in reaction to this emergency. We believe that by being more prepared we will be able to react quicker and better if this type of emergency happens again. We don't believe that it will be less scary though.

However, by following these lessons, we will be able to concentrate more on the alpaca and less on figuring out how to get them correct medical treatment.

Grab the cell phone, notebook, medical kit, and backpack and GO!

About the Authors:

Renee and Barry Prokop have created and developed Black Meadow Suris to provide a diverse collection of suri alpacas. We have a passion for quality customer service and friendliness. Come experience the power that a small dedicated farm can bring to your breeding program! Services that we provide include long and short term agisting, breeding services, and alpaca sales. We also are



opening two stores; one online and the other at the farm. Renee and Barry operate Black Meadow Suris just outside of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Fredericksburg is located in the rolling hills just below the falls of the Rappahannock River and halfway between the two Civil War capitals , Washington, D.C. and Richmond, VA.

Renee, who is no stranger to the farm, will manage the day-to-day operations of Black Meadow Suris. Both Barry and Renee will continue to explore, learn, and communicate better ways that they have found to manage their growing farm.

To find out more about Black Meadow Suris, call us at 703-764-9077; email us at Renee@prokops.com or visit us on the web at www.blackmeadowsuris.com

