

# Leaving On A Jet Plane

*Or Alpaca Sitting 101*

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Hawaii or maybe just a quick family weekend up in the mountains? All you have to do is pack your bags, make sure that you have your tickets and hotel reservations are confirmed. So just lock up the ol' homestead and off you go, right? Well, not so fast, Bucko. Did you forget about your alpacas? Who is going to take care of them while you are gone? And more importantly, have you set them up to succeed or fail?

Just like other livestock farming, alpaca farmers cannot easily take a break. Alpacas are on the farm - twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. They need to be fed, watered, cared for and monitored to ensure their health and productive.



We sometimes forget that the average person may not have a firm knowledge base in livestock care. I believe that the main reason is that most people compare taking care of an alpaca like taking care of their family pet – dog or cat. Let them out twice a day, give them a bowl of food and water, pat them on the head and you are done.

Not so with alpacas.

One should never assume that everyone knows how to manage and care for alpacas, or more specifically; how to care for Your alpacas. The challenge isn't so much in preparing your alpaca sitter for everyday events but rather preparing them for potential problems that may occur when you are away. There are many situations that the experienced alpaca farmer takes for granted. The casual alpaca sitter that is ill trained will not know how to deal. So, if you ever plan on leaving the farm to go to an alpaca show, vacation, or work trip; it would be worth the time and effort to sit down and develop a game plan to ensure that your alpaca sitter can handle most, if not all, situations that may occur when you are away.

**Finding a Sitter** – But before we get into what should go into your “game plan”, the first step is to identify a willing and trust worthy alpaca sitter. They are not as easy to find as one may think. They do not advertise in the yellow pages and they probably did not

grow up with “alpaca sitter” as their career objective. So when in doubt, go to the places where you are most likely to find the willing and/or able person to take on the position title of “alpaca sitter”. Some likely places to look include:

- **Family** – If you have family members that live close and they owe you a favor or three, why not get them into the act and share your alpaca experience with them;
- **Nearby alpaca/llama farm** – This is probably the most ideal solution since they will know how to care for alpacas and you may be able to trade alpaca sitting services so that you both can get a little time away from the farm;
- **Your Veterinarian** – Probably not the most obvious choice but your Vet most likely knows more alpaca people than you do since they get called out to their farms. They may be able to suggest nearby farms that will be able to help you, especially if you are newer to the industry. They will also be able to ask around using their network of people to see who may be interested;
- **Local Feed Store or Local Coop** – This watering hole is a place that all local farmers will go to get their grain or supplies. Don't be shy about asking if they know anyone that provides farm sitting services and ask if you could post an ad on their bulletin board;
- **Future Farmers of America or 4H** – Here are a couple of organizations that are strong in educating their members in taking care of livestock. There may be someone local that is willing to learn more about alpacas and how to care for them.
- **Neighbors** – This is a good way to get to know your neighbors!
- **Local University's Agriculture Department** – Students that are enrolled in these programs are already interested in farming and livestock. Ask if you can talk to the class about alpacas or even place a bulletin on their jobs board.



If you are able to find someone that you know and trust; you are ready to get down to developing a game plan to ensure their success. If you don't know the person, there are a couple of more steps that you may want to go through before you get down to developing your game plan.

The next step after you have identified a person is to invite them out to the farm. Talk to them. Find out what their experience is in working with alpacas or livestock. In fact, this is their interview to see if you and they want to go to the next step. At this point one or both of you could determine that this is not the best match. What about references? Sounds a little silly but after all, this is a job. It is also a quick way to get independent confirmation that the person that you are looking for is capable and dependable.

So you have found the correct person! One side note – I would try to identify at least two people. Why? What if your identified alpaca sitter is sick or out of town when you

need them? This way, with two identified sitters, you will always have a “Plan B”. An additional benefit of identifying more than one person is that you will also have a ready workforce come shearing time!

**Game Plan** – OK, on to the game plan. Let’s start with the basic plan. At a minimum, the alpaca sitter will need to know about your farm, routine, and alpacas. Sounds easy enough and it is, if you are organized. When we are ready to go out of town, we have a special book called “Barn Facts” and it includes the following:

**Alpaca Pictures and Vital Information** – We were attending one of our first alpaca shows and received a call from our sitter, the conversation went something like this,

“One of the alpacas has been lying down all day and her eyes look a little glassy.”

“Which alpaca is it?”

“The white one.”

“OK, which white one?”

“How should I know, they all look alike.”

I remember going around the farm before we left and telling her all about the alpacas and their names, ages, and little quirks. I know my alpacas. But put me on another farm with an owner telling me all their facts and figures and within five minutes I am confused and completely lost as to who is



who. I am sure that our sitter felt the same way. And then add to that the stress of a potential problem and all knowledge seems to go by the wayside. This is why we now have the Barn Facts Book. It has a current picture and I stress the word *current*. It is not helpful if the picture is a year old, especially if the picture was taken as a cria and you are now looking at a full grown alpaca. It is also helpful to note any distinguishing marks as well as their vital information like age, weight, sex and if female, their pregnancy status. There is also a copy of their ARI in case the vet needs it.

**Veterinary Contact Information** – We learned that the hard way as well. We came down to the barn one day and an alpaca was down on the ground laying on its side for no apparent reason. We needed to get a vet out to the farm as soon as possible. Where was the vet contact information? The alpaca sitter may be faced with the same situation. Now you have two problems, one, calling the vet and second, identifying which alpaca is sick? Our Barn Facts Book contains contact information for three vets, listed in order of priority. Call the first. If they do not answer, call the second and then the third.

**Feeding Instructions** – When we first started in the industry, we were under the impression that all alpacas are created equal in terms of what they eat. After a couple of years in the industry we now realize that each alpaca is unique. As a small farm we

have the luxury where we can individualize their feeding regiment. Some are older and need more feed, some are slower eaters and need more time, some are pregnant and need a different feed, some are getting a little heavy and need to be trimmed down and some are younger and need to be separated so that they do not get pushed around by



the big boys. As your farm grows in alpaca numbers it becomes more difficult to individualize feeding but even then you try to group the alpacas by like needs. So having feeding instructions written down – how much feed, minerals, and hay need to be out at any one time is important. There are also times when certain alpacas will need to have specific medicines added to their feed. These should be documented and the medicine clearly marked with alpaca name and dosage information. It allows the routine to continue even if you are not there. Anyone that has been on an

alpaca farm at feeding time recognizes that alpacas love their feeding time. One way to test to see if you are ready is to pretend that you are gone. On our farm Renee typically does all of the feeding. However, on Sunday's it is my turn and for all intensive purposes I am the alpaca sitter that day. Since our feeding instructions are all kept up to date and written down it turns out to be fairly routine. Plus it is a great motivator for Renee to ensure that I feed correctly! Why do we do this? One, it gives Renee a break and two, we constantly want to be prepared in case we get called out of town in a hurry.

**Special Needs and Instructions** – This one pager should go at the front of the Barn Fact Book and should detail any issues or problems that the sitter should be on the lookout for or need to take into consideration while they are caring for the alpacas. Items like alpaca health issues, problems with predators, crias due, or possible visitors are just a few topics you may want to include on this page.

**Emergency Contact Information** – Clear contact information should be included in the book. It should detail your visiting location and phone numbers. Alternatively, it should also give a second point of contact should something happen and they cannot get in touch with you. Possible choices include a nearby alpaca farm or the vet.

So there you have it, all of the basics to get an alpaca sitter on the road to success. The next part is to try to figure out everything that you haven't thought. Remember, it isn't the expected that throws one for a loop, it is the unexpected. Let's go through a couple situations:

**All alpacas look alike.** True, unless you are around them regularly, they do. Especially if you have a lot of one color. Also, in terms of a crisis, is anyone going to look at the Barn Facts Book and flip through it trying to identify which alpaca is which? The answer here is to use name necklaces. They are easy to place around the alpacas necks and are easy to read. Now you are quickly able to identify the alpaca for whatever purpose that you need. A good situation to use this in is during birthing season so you can quickly keep an eye on those that are due soon.



**How did Roxie get pregnant?** Whoops, forgot to mention to the sitter about open gates and the importance of keeping the males separated from the females? Stressing the importance of closing the gates each and every time can not be mentioned enough. Gate security will keep unwanted pregnancies out of your breeding program and may

save you a vet bill if you have two males who enjoy “duking it out” a little too much.



**They don't come when I whistle!** We had to assist a female with feed her cria. We bottle fed the little guy for two weeks. With much patients and encouragement the cria finally nursed the bottle. Each feeding was much the same, contain the cria, introduce the bottle and encourage the little one that this is a good thing. Our friend who is a cattle farmer just shook his head. Laughing he said “if that was a calf that we were bottle feeding after the first

bottle that calf would knock over everything in its path to get to the bottle.” Not an alpaca.

Most alpacas do not enjoy being cuddled or handled. So the approach to catch one is different. Having a catch area identified to control them and moving slowly and quietly greatly reduces stress levels for alpaca and human. The idea is to get them into a confined space were you can halter and lead the animal with little excitement. This is probably a skill that you will need to teach the alpaca sitter. You may also have to teach your sitter how to halter the alpaca. Sometimes halters are not that intuitive. Labeling

your halters will ensure the sitter will know what halter goes with what alpaca. There is nothing worse than having to halter an alpaca only to have to grab a handful of halters and try on different halters before you find one that fits

**But, you have dogs?** Be firm and up front when outlining what is allowed and not allowed on the farm. Posting the farm rules and providing the sitter a written copy will save you a lot of headaches later. Just because you have dogs and the sitter sees that the dogs are around the alpacas doesn't mean that they can bring their pets onto the farm. Alpacas will accept your farm dogs because over time your dogs have shown that they are not a threat. Strange dogs are another story altogether.



**How did the alpaca break its leg?** We are constantly on the look out for anything that could hurt the alpacas. Something as simple as a dropped baling twine, from a square bale of hay, could end up around a cria's neck or get tangled around their legs. Safety checks are a part of our daily routine. However, for someone that is not accustomed to being on the farm, it wouldn't hurt to remind them to be careful about what they leave laying around.

**Why did all my alpacas get sick while I was away?** Explaining the importance of maintaining a clean and healthy environment for the alpacas is key. If the alpaca sitter is coming from another farm, ensure that they have access to clean boots, spray disinfectant for cloths and boots and hand sanitizer at the main gate.

**Don't know how it happened but the alpaca sitter fell out of the hay loft and broke his leg.** Before you have a sitter on the farm, call your insurance company and pose that question. The alpaca sitter is on your property at your request and hurt themselves. Are you covered? If you are not, you may want to look into getting additional coverage.



**Don't overlook the obvious.** Things that seem so simple are very important. How do you turn on the barn lights, where is the grain stored, when do I turn on the fans, when do I plug in the water heaters, where is the telephone located at the barn and what is the number. Your Farm Facts Book will be a work in progress and will need to be updated often. This should become part of your

routine, try updating the Farm Facts Book when you record your monthly herd health information.

After all of this you are probably convinced that the world is a scary place and that you don't ever want to leave the farm after all!

But it really isn't all that bad. The chances are that you will go on vacation and the farm will look exactly the same when you get back. Remember, what you are planning for is the unexpected. So it pays to trust the alpacas, while you are away, with someone that has all of the information that they need to handle anything that life throws at them.

Lastly, if you are going to hire an alpaca sitter, train them. Require the sitter to assist you with your daily routine, and then let them go through the routine several times while you are there to offer advice. Let them ask all of the questions they want so they feel comfortable with where everything is located and what to do in certain situations. Then take a day off and hire the sitter to work alone. Leave the farm, take that special someone for dessert and coffee. Stay away long enough for the sitter to complete the feeding and cleaning routine. We recommend that you pay your sitter while they are learning. A few dollars well spent for peace of mind.

Then pack your bags, do one last walk through with your sitter and it is off to the beach.

### **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. Barry has published many articles about alpaca farming in American Livestock Magazine, Small Farm Today, and the New Zealand Lifestyle Farmer Magazine.*

*Renee, who is no stranger to the farm, manages 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](mailto:Renee@prokops.com) or visit us on the web at [www.blackmeadowfarm.com](http://www.blackmeadowfarm.com)*