

FARM MAGAZINE  
GOOD SHEPHERD

Kevin Butler

1417 words

1 July 2009

The Weekly Times

HERWEK

1 - FIRST

28

English

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Protect your lambs the easy way with a carefully selected alpaca, writes Kevin Butler

Have you ever asked yourself why you didn't do something a lot earlier that would have saved you thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours work?

I refer to buying an alpaca for \$400 to guard your lambs and sheep from fox and wild dog attacks.

Personally, with three White Suffolk stud ewes about to lamb to a \$25,000 stud ram, I am not going to take the chance of having one of them chewed up by a hungry fox.

So, as a crusty old sheep farmer who hates anything on his farm that doesn't grow wool, produce lambs and baa, I did the unthinkable: I bought one neutered wether from a trusted alpaca producer - under guarantee - and have never looked back.

With Dan the alpaca on 24-hour watch over the flock, I have discarded the costly, useless and counter-productive practices of fox baiting during the day and spotlight shooting at night.

Now I know, when I go to bed at night, that my lambs are guaranteed to be alive and well the next morning.

I believe that along with rearranging my fences and lambing paddocks, the rare silver bullet of the ultimate in lambing percentages has arrived.

Having said that, it is absolutely essential you get the right animal for your needs, and buy it from a reputable producer who will guarantee it will do the job, and who will take it back if it doesn't.

## SUCCESS STORIES

Little scientific research has been done on alpacas as flock guardians, because cheap, natural controls do not pour squillions of dollars into big chemical companies' coffers like poisons traditionally do.

But anecdotal reports of alpacas' success, when properly chosen and introduced, are far too numerous to be scoffed at.

One Western District farmer found his lambing percentage went from

96 per cent to 173 per cent with one alpaca added to the ewe flock at lambing.

The overwhelming majority of farmers who have an alpaca have reported increased lambing percentages of at least 10 per cent and as high as 30 per cent.

One sheep farmer from Dorrigo, in the New England region of NSW, previously had up to 70 sheep killed in a single night by marauding wild dogs and dingo-crosses coming out of nearby national parks. He has gone down to rare single-digit losses since four alpacas have been introduced to the 500-head sheep mob.

Of course, the big, aggressive alpacas required for this job are very different from an alpaca you would choose for a small farm with children around.

The NSW farmer found that foxes and wild dogs gave a wide berth to his alpaca-guarded property and were invariably shot by neighbours up to 4km away, who used fox baits and spotlighting for control.

On another occasion, spotlighters discovered a hunted fox would not escape through an alpaca-protected paddock.

Instead, it pelted up and down the boundary fence in a frenzy, until it was finally shot.

Many foxes and some domestic dogs have been killed inside alpaca paddocks. The bigger, more aggressive, alpacas have been known to reduce vicious pig dogs to a quivering mess before their pig-hunting masters rescued them.

It is well known that twin lambs have a much higher chance of surviving with alpacas guarding the flock.

We do know that sheep and an alpaca bond and anyone who tries to separate the two is in for a hard time.

Farmers tell numerous stories of alpacas fending off eagles trying to take newborn lambs, leading orphan lambs back to their mothers, protecting goats, broilgas, chooks and even turkeys from neighbours' dogs during the day and foxes at night, and guarding dairy calves that are vulnerable during birthing.

This is no surprise, as alpacas have been selectively bred to protect flocks from mountain lions for up to 5000 years.

## LAMBING EWES

How easy is it to have alpacas running with your mob of lambing ewes?

Very easy. My reputable and respected alpaca producer simply brought him to my sheep-holding paddock next to the shearing shed and opened the door of the horse float. The pregnant ewes simply walked up to the alpaca to get acquainted.

The rest is history. It has been worry-free nights and lambing percentage at 100 per cent of what the pregnancy test suggested.

Alpacas are ruminants, so - like sheep - they eat grass or hay on the ground and drink water from a trough. Drenching is the same as for Merino wethers - once or twice a year.

You can muster on a motorbike without dogs and have the alpaca lead the sheep through the gates, or simply train your dogs to have the "wood" over the alpaca.

With big aggressive alpacas, designed for the wild dog and dingo country, use motor bikes or horses only and leave your sheep dogs at home.

The point here is that all farms are different and your needs are different to another farmer's. The key is to find a specialist alpaca producer who will guarantee their flock protector on your property, for your conditions.

Shearing is done by restraining the alpaca with ropes as it lies on its back.

It is all a whole lot faster and easier than shivering by a spotlight with gun in hand in the back of a ute on a cold winter's night.

Anyone who has shorn a long-legged Border Leicester ram with the help of a friend to roll it into position will find an alpaca easy to shear. At the worst, shear it while it is standing up.

## FREQUENT OBJECTIONS

If you are serious about improving your lambing percentages while saving time and money, but are still unsure of securing the services of an alpaca, consider these frequently made statements and their answers:

\* "Joe Farmer from Buggabunya had one and it didn't do anything."

You must find a reputable breeder. Chances are a small-time breeder conned Joe Farmer into buying something useless for a cheap price - like a blue-eyed white alpaca which may be deaf.

Younger animals and females may be unsuitable until instinctive and learned behaviours take hold.

The key is: always buy your carefully selected alpaca from a reputable and respected alpaca producer. Make sure your producer has a great reputation for service after purchase and will guarantee his alpacas in writing.

\* "All my neighbours will think I am crazy if they see one in my paddock - it just looks so stupid among a mob of Merinos."

Believe me, the only stupid animal in this scenario is the farmer who uses no flock protection, runs around laying fox baits or shoots at night to reduce fox numbers.

\* "I don't want to have one hanging around for 12 months of the year when I only lamb for six weeks."

A wether alpaca eats as much as one sheep, so it is not a bad investment for 12 months protection.

The other alternative is to lease one, but you do need up to a month's lead time and who knows what disease you could be bringing in from another farm.

My view is it is best to buy outright. They are very reasonably priced and buying also lets the alpaca settle down with the flock.

\* "You can't get just one alpaca, you need two."

This is a myth. One is fine and it will bond with your sheep for company.

\* "What if the alpaca gets out? How do I get it back?"

Alpacas need to bond in a secure small paddock at first. Once they are integrated into the flock they are just happy to be minders. They rarely stray like sheep do.

## FOX FAILURES

State-wide fox-reduction programs, using Fox Off and shooting, have been abject failures and are a waste of taxpayers' money.

It would be better to have a few of our precious native animals guarded in fox and cat-proof sanctuaries by alpacas, than maintain the status quo. The current situation will lead to a gradual extinction of the remaining susceptible native species over the next 100 years, due to foxes and cats.

I encourage all farmers with anything from goats to free-range chickens to do your homework on alpacas as the ultimate flock protector.

Next month I will discuss alpaca management.

WKT-20090701-1-N28-617112

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