

A Rolls Royce in Every Pasture

Like most alpaca ranches just starting out, we obsessed over every detail. We planned, knowing good and well that the best thing about a plan is having the knowledge base to change said plan on a dime. Research into fencing, bloodlines, feed and general husbandry took up every spare moment. Heck it still does. But once it was time to move onto our dream ranch the pace picked up with intent furor. The safety of our animals in their new home was and continues to be of great concern. We needed a Livestock Guardian Dog.

Breeders of several types of LGD were contacted as were those who had working LGD's with their alpacas. The reviews were great and the plan seemed to fit in nicely with our love of animals, four legged additions to the family are always in order. While the expense of an LGD didn't deter us, the time involved in training began to weigh on our minds. We needed a trusted guardian "now" not two years from now. Small details began to raise their heads and whisper "this may not be the right answer for you".

Our family is comprised of several fur coated four legged friends that share our home let alone those in our pastures. The melding of an LGD into this mix could prove, complicated. Matters of dominance, fighting and dead cats became more of the norm instead of the exception. Then there's the barking. Barking is a LGDs way of telling predators "Stay away" and is an intrinsic part of their protection of their herd. While affective, this last bit isn't even slightly conducive to good neighbor relations.

Of all the stories and information we collected the thing that finally tipped the scales was the possibility of what anyone would consider a nightmare. A long awaited cria and a LGD that had a bad day. It has long been said that there are no bad dogs, only bad owners. This last may well be a fact but due to shame and sorrow it means that when such incidences happen, they are kept quiet, very very quiet. If I'd witnessed a trusted guardian maul a new born cria I wouldn't want to speak of it either. Nope, a livestock guardian dog wasn't for us, at least not now.

The security plan we had/have is multi layered; six foot electric fences, video and voice activated audio monitors so we can see and hear what is happening in the pasture at all times as well as motion sensitive lights and radios to scare away nervous predators. But we want another layer, a sentinel to delay an aggressive invader until we arrive on the scene. We began paying attention to stories about llamas as guardians.

In the meantime every other detail large and small was attended to. Breedings were timed so that even in our tiny herd, the crias would have a pal with which to grow. Our three boys were moved to the new property and Rolls Royce a gelded llama was added to the herd. Not every llama is fit to be a guardian just as not every llama is a good stud or packer, working with an experienced llama breeder who knows their herd inside and out is imperative. Rolls was raised with alpacas and thus already had a keen understanding of his charges before arriving on site. Guardian llamas need to be curious, aggressive and independent not to mention intelligent. Rolls Royce has all of these attributes and then some; he took over the boys pasture with one glance. Neck wrestling and fighting were strictly forbidden. At feeding time each alpaca was to eat only his ration, Rolls wouldn't have any food thieves in his pasture and heaven help an alpaca bold enough to attempt to steal Rolls' dinner.

The first thing Rolls did upon entry into his new pasture was walk the fence lines and survey the surrounding areas. This has become his daily routine and should anything new appear the alarm call is sounded. Anytime Rolls gives the alarm call we come running. Not just because we need to see what the cause may be but so Rolls understands we are listening. Without fail we praise him and give him some small treat, it's obvious to all that Rolls takes great pride in his work. Cause for alarm may be an AWOL pot-bellied pig, a flock of wild turkeys or a neighborhood dog out for a nightly stroll; in any case we trust Rolls' judgment. Anything he deems worthy an alarm call is reason for us to come running.

About the time our girls moved to our new home we began to realize (yet again) that no matter how well thought out, some plans change mid stream. One of the two girls due to give birth wasn't really pregnant. At one point she was and there was still amniotic fluid present but no fetus. Of course we were heartbroken for many reasons not the least of which was that the cria about to be born wouldn't have a playmate. Or so we thought.

Rolls Royce's move from the boys pasture into the girl's was fraught with changes large and small. Mr. Royce's entire demeanor toward food and territory shifted dynamically. In the boys pasture any alpaca coming near his food got blasted with a wad of green. Yet, when one of the girls showed even the first hint of interest in Rolls' ration, he acquiesced without hesitation. It became obvious that the piggy girls would eat all of Rolls food should they be given a chance. Thus Rolls was given his own feeding pen to help level the playing field. And while Rolls was suddenly less aggressive regarding food and space he was dramatically more intent on guarding his herd. Instead of just giving the alarm call and charging the fence line to get closer to the perceived threat, now Rolls charges the fence and stomps the ground aggressively. If there is something Rolls finds especially worrying (like the escaped pot-bellied pig) he gathers the girls into what he feels is a safe area and then charges and stomps in the direction of the threat, while constantly checking and re checking on his girls to see that they have stayed where he put them and are safe and sound.

On January 1st 2003 we had our first cria born on our ranch, a fantastic way to begin the New Year; I recommend it to anyone. We named the maroon beauty Beryl Markham and Rolls as per the usual was first to check out the new "thing" in the pasture. It didn't take long for us to realize that adding Rolls to our herd was one of the best choices we've made to date. Rolls followed Beryl everywhere. When she started learning to graze and would venture too close to the poop pile, Rolls would move her. When Beryl would annoy one of the pregnant girls, Rolls would nudge her away. Rolls is the perfect nanny. Then one day Beryl tried to get the big girls to play and prong around the pasture with her, the gentle ones looked at her with distain, the not so gentle ones left her spotted with green. Off she went on her own, but not for long.

There is something breathtaking about a 320 pound llama pronging around a pasture with a 21 pound cria. Actually it was frightening at first, until we realized that Rolls would go to any length to avoid bumping into Beryl. It became a common sight, Rolls and Beryl pronging around the pasture together. Our cria had a playmate after all. When it came time for Beryl to have a creep feeder, she refused to utilize it. We decided to try feeding her with Rolls in his meal pen and to our delight it worked splendidly. Quite simply the gentleness that Rolls displayed with Beryl was spectacular.

Beryl has since been weaned and moved on to her new home. Rolls wasn't happy when we took her from his pasture and was obviously a bit lonely for the first few days. What Rolls doesn't (or maybe he does) know is that he is about to have two more charges. Two crias are due in the coming weeks. Will they be boys or girls? What color will they be? These are fun to speculate on but the thing we are certain of is that they will have a wonderful llama uncle to tend them.

It is essential to note that we don't expect Rolls to do it all on his own. He is merely a layer (an important one at that) in our security system. The bottom line is there are many ways to protect your herd. The important thing is that you find ways that work for you. Protection doesn't need to be expensive or elaborate but it does need to fit with your ranch's personality.