



PHOTOS: D. 'BING' BINGHAM

'Our Llama Fiber Is Valuable, but The Goal Is to Sell Breeding Stock'

When it comes to llamas, Andy and Cheryl Tillman are experts—he's written a book on the subject, and she's a veterinarian.

WELCOME to Tillman Llamas and Suri Alpacas. My name is Andy Tillman. My wife, Cheryl, and I raise about 70 llamas and 150 suri alpacas on our 80-acre ranch, about 4 miles north of Bend, Oregon. Between us, we have over 50 years' experience with these small South American ruminants.

I started raising llamas in 1975, published the first book on llamas, *Speechless Brothers*, in 1981, and have been hosting educational clinics for 20 years. I also studied llamas and alpacas in Peru with the Agency for International Development.

In 1988, Cheryl and I were married. She's one of the most experienced alpaca and llama veterinarians anywhere.

Ours is one of only three businesses to ever import llamas and alpacas from Bolivia or Peru. We've won national championships both in the U.S. and Bo-

livia—something no other breeder has ever done.

There are about 160,000 registered llamas in the U.S. and 40,000 alpacas, but only 6,000 of those are suris. The rest are huacaya alpacas, which have highly crimped fleece. Suris have long, twisted fleece with a high luster, like silk.

Although this luxury fiber is highly valued, we make our living selling breeding stock. Along the way, much to our surprise, we've become mentors to others.

Last night, we went to the airport to pick up friends from Pennsylvania who are visiting us for 2 weeks. They were delighted to see the snowcapped mountains west of our farmhouse. This morning, the sky was so clear we could even see Mount Hood, 100 miles distant.

After breakfast, we told our visitors, Connie and Anna, how we handle pasture management, then I changed irriga-



OREGON Llama and alpaca breeders Cheryl and Andy Tillman sit beneath the sign at the entrance to their ranch near Bend (left). They have a beautiful view from pastures that they irrigate in the semiarid high desert (above). Right: A pair of alpacas seem to be staring intently.

tion lines. Here in the semiarid high desert, we get only 12 inches of rain a year. We irrigate our 67 acres of hay crop with wheel lines and use aboveground, solid-set irrigation for the pastures.

Cheryl, Connie and Anna went to a chamber music festival in Yachats. They'll stay at our beach house, and I'll join them soon. Cheryl and I have been planning a brief vacation—we've put 22,000 miles on our pickup this spring and summer going to sales and shows.

July 11—Sunday. Two females have been losing weight, so I treated them with an oral wormer and antibiotic. Weighed some babies and fed the lactating females alfalfa and grain. It takes about 4 hours to feed, clean water tanks, change wheel lines and check on the babies, known as crias.

July 12—I'm chairman of the Swalley Irrigation District, which had a board meeting at 9:30 a.m. I was up ear-

ly to breed a suri female before the weather got too hot.

One suri had delivered a cria without assistance. I applied iodine to the cria's navel, gave her an injection of selenium and vitamins A and D, weighed her and moved the pair to the west side of the main barn. Sure looked like a rancher when I showed up at the board meeting with iodine on my hands.

July 13—Tuesday and Wednesday are herd health days. We check females to see if they're receptive to the male, do ultrasounds, trim toes, vaccinate, deworm and check weights. Today we postponed this chore because Cheryl was at the beach house and Vince, the additional animal handler we hire on these days, was out of town.

I joined Cheryl at the beach house and checked on my father, who's spending the summer in his travel trailer in Newport, 20 miles north of Yachats. He's 82 and has limited mobility due to post-polio syndrome, but he's still fishing. He's been keeping Cheryl, Connie and Anna supplied with black bass and Dungeness crab.

July 14—Robin Crowe, our hired hand, called from the ranch. A driver



showed up a day early to pick up an alpaca we're shipping to Washington, but we got that straightened out.

While exploring the tide pool in front of our beach house, we saw brown pelicans, harbor seals and sea lions. A gray whale blew and blew, then dove for several minutes in a 30-fathom trench only 200 yards away.

Robin checked in to update us. It's been hot at home, but no premature babies.

July 15—Robin reported that three alpaca crias were born before noon.

We felt confident enough in Robin to let her process the dams. The babies were all full-term and normal weight.

It's rare for Cheryl and me to vacation together. One of us is almost always at the ranch, and we usually work 7 days a week. We've enjoyed our time away from chores. Tonight, we bought some pastries and cracked crab, and invited my father over for dinner.

July 16—I headed back to the ranch with Connie and Anna. My car's water pump seized up about 30 miles west of



LLAMA LOOK. Llamas peer down a pasture hill (above) while Cheryl pours out feed for alpacas (upper right). Opposite: A waterfall using recycled irrigation water is part of landscaping near the ranch house...Andy taking pictures for brochures.

Sisters, stranding us on a mountain pass. Fortunately, my cell phone worked, and we had a tow truck in 30 minutes.

When we got home, I couldn't figure out why 12 of our yearling females were in the wrong pasture. Turned out a gate was accidentally left open, and a neighbor who saw them on the road herded the animals into the nearest pasture.

This is why Cheryl and I so seldom get off the ranch together.

July 17—Saturday. Cheryl returned from Yachats. Our vacation was too short.

One of our suris had a baby girl. Anna noticed the dam's name on its neck chain and immediately started trying to come up with a name for the cria. After witnessing about 10,000 births in



both North and South America, we're always looking for new names and welcomed the help!

July 18—Sunday. Cheryl checked llamas and alpacas while I changed irrigation lines. We enjoy having the ranch to ourselves on weekends. It reminds us that we chose this life for the privacy and open space.

I prepared a sales package for an alpaca breeder in California. I'm a photographer and former journalist, so we prepare our own print materials.

July 19—Cheryl stayed at the ranch, doing the work of two men, while I took my father to his doctor appointments. The weather was cooler, so we did herd health a day early.

Cheryl and our guests bred five females, did eight ultrasounds, witnessed one birth, and weighed and dewormed 38 pregnant females. They also sorted animals into pastures based on length of gestation and nutritional needs.

July 20—We've hired an ad agency to replace our two existing Web sites with a



single new one, www.tillmansranch.com. The agency wants to feature Cheryl and me more. This isn't something we would've done, but they say new customers will want to know us.

July 21—Cheryl showed Connie how to insert an intrauterine infusion tube. She also did ultrasounds on a receptive female to show Connie what normal ovaries look like. We practiced venipuncture, bred four females and checked two others for receptivity to males.

Alpacas and llamas ovulate after breeding, so if they reject the male, we know they've probably ovulated.

July 22—Bred 10 females. Most ranches use one well-known male for breeding, but we use multiple prize-winning males. As a result, all our crias are born within the same 6-week period.

July 23—We're only 45 minutes from the alpine lakes of the Cascade Mountains, and this morning we went kayaking on one of them after chores.

July 24—Cheryl and I circled Elk Lake easily, despite a strong breeze and light chop.

July 24—Saturday. Treated a female for an ulcerated cornea. She must have run into a fence during the night.

Took Connie and Anna to Redmond for their flight back to Philadelphia. A good regional airport was a major factor in our decision to settle here. When we were importing animals, we once flew 150,000 miles in one year, so it was nice to have an airport 15 minutes away down a two-lane country road.

July 25—Sunday. Moved my father's trailer to an RV park next door to his fishing boat. The park overlooks Newport Bay. What a view!

I backed the trailer at a right angle into a narrow gravel pad next to a steep drop-off on my first try! By the time the neighbors offered to help direct me, I was already unhooked. After all the traveling we've done with our animals, one thing I can put on my resume is knowing how to drive a truck and trailer.

July 26—Spent most of the day preparing a sales list for a friend in New York who wants to select alpacas for a



client. She'll fly out at the end of August to look at the animals.

July 27—Shipped out two female llamas sent here for breeding to our male, "HCLA Bolivian Over Exposed". The females will return to Georgia. Our business is truly coast-to-coast.

We donated a stud service to Over Exposed at the Llama Futurity Association show and sale in Louisville, Kentucky in 2003. His stud fee was \$3,750, the highest of the auction.

There are two show circuits in the llama business. The Alpaca and Llama Show Association, which I cofounded in 1986, has classes for conformation, obstacle, cart, packing and public relations. The LFA and Celebrity Sale World Futurity are halter classes only, and evaluate conformation and fiber.

I've been asked to be a judge for the 2004 Futurity, so we won't be showing. If you're in the Louisville area Sept. 17-19, come see the most beautiful llamas in the United States.

July 28—Cheryl's been training ♂



Vince to interpret ultrasound images. He got lots of practice today—they did ultrasounds on 24 females. He also trimmed toes, a constant chore on a ranch with so many animals.

July 29—An alpaca customer placed an order for a guard llama, and we reluctantly selected “Nirvano”, a male that we have both loved from the time he was born.

Our llamas are raised with alpacas and are exposed to coyotes, bobcats and cougars in their winter pasture along the Deschutes River. The llama’s natural curiosity makes it an excellent “watchdog”. Guard llamas—castrated males—will run right up to a coyote or feral dog and make an alarm call when they spot a cougar. We charge \$1,500 for a guard llama, almost as much as an intact male.

July 30—We test-bred an 18-month-old suri male, “Chamoso”. We bought him with two other breeders for nearly \$60,000, and are anxious to get him breeding as soon as possible. This afternoon, we met with our advertising agency to talk about our Web site.

July 31—Saturday. Twenty pine and birch trees arrived for a landscaping project. We’re making a new entrance to our ranch and taking over some pasture

by the house for a backyard and water feature.

Aug. 1—Sunday. Cheryl and I walked around the ranch together on a “night check”, looking at each and every alpaca or llama. We admired the llama babies sired by Over Exposed, one of our suri-type males.

Seven out of 12 have been “suri type”, with long, drapery high-luster fleeces. We lingered in the pasture where they ran around and made us giggle.

They’re the best llamas we’ve ever produced. We tried to analyze what made these babies so special, but there was no common denominator on the dams other than that they’ve been some of our best producers.

Some dams were direct imports; oth-

ers have 25 years of pedigree going back to our most famous sires. Producing exceptional babies like this makes me feel like I did when I first got llamas almost 30 years ago. I remember the first time I saw babies “prong” or bound like deer. I was so excited I called my parents and told them, “They bound just like antelope!”

Aug. 2—There were Canada geese nestled in the grass at the top of the hill where the pregnant alpaca females stay. The long black heads and necks of the geese almost looked like baby llamas.

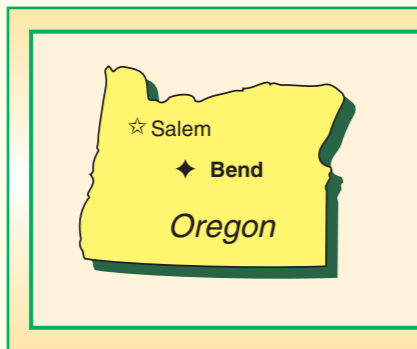
We keep a guard llama in with each pasture of alpacas, and before long, “Maestro” discovered the geese. He chased them off, and the alpacas settled down for the night.

Home County Close-Up

The Tillmans live in

Deschutes County, Oregon, which...

- features the Cascade Mountains in the west and the Oregon high desert in the east with irrigated farmland in between with soils of pumice sand; produces beef cattle, horses, hay, grain, garlic and potatoes
- gets 8 inches (desert) and 60 inches (mountains) of precipitation/year
- averages late-July temperatures between 45° and 100°



COOL, DUDE. With such thick coats, alpacas enjoy getting cooled off with a hose (far left). Left: An alpaca chews a grass stem. Above: Cheryl keeps health and breeding records on the computer. Right: Creeks are an antidote to summer heat.

Aug. 3—We quit irrigating our hay crop today. It will take a week for the hay to dry enough to cut. We usually make two or three cuttings, but because we lose money raising and selling hay, we’ve decided this year to only do one cutting.

Aug. 4—Cheryl left for a conference where she is representing the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association at a meeting sponsored by the USDA. The agenda is to develop standard individual and premise identification for both alpaca and llama breeders.

Better individual and premise ID will help isolate any bio-terrorism attacks in the United States. The Alpaca Registry Inc. requires DNA matching but not permanent ID, like tattoos, micro-chipping or a radio-frequency ear tag.

Aug. 5—I made a CD with 25 photos of the alpacas one of our customers bought, then sent the CD to her. The photos show the animals as babies, being shown and with their ribbons. Also shown are their service sires.

A good photo helps sell an animal, and a surprising amount of my time is spent taking photographs or archiving them.

Aug. 6—Got up early to do chores, then got paperwork ready for both an alpaca and a llama that were picked up by their new owners, who live in Spokane, Washington.

Aug. 7—Saturday. One of our favorite female alpacas had a beautiful maroon-colored baby girl. The baby has one of the finest fleeces of the year. All babies feel nice, but this newborn feels just like silk.

I could tell right away that she’ll be show quality, so I’ll spend time with her over the next few days. We do not literally “imprint” a baby into thinking that people are their dam, but I do gentle an alpaca down like you would a foal.

Aug. 8—Sunday. Another beautiful baby suri alpaca was born. It’s a white male out of one of our best white dams. She has made a \$30,000 and \$35,000 baby in the last two years, and even though this one is a male, it’ll be stud quality.

Aug. 9—The dam that delivered yesterday still had a retained placenta today. I gave her more oxytocin and gently applied traction to the portion she had presented. I eventually got the pla-

centa detached, washed her up so the flies wouldn’t bother her, trimmed her toes, dewormed her and put an ID collar on her nice new baby.

Also had a big healthy male baby that was black. Only about 5% of the U.S. population of suri alpacas are black, so I am glad to have this one.

Happily, Cheryl returned safely from her conference.

Aug. 10—The Oregon Department of Agriculture asked Cheryl to be a first responder in case of an animal health emergency.

We vaccinated a large group of alpacas and llamas, trimmed toes and weighed mothers and babies. Cheryl keyed day sheets from the barn into our computer.

We ended the day—and this diary—by cutting our hay crop this evening. We got 40 tons, all pre-sold to a nearby stable. Hope you’ve enjoyed your visit with us, our llamas and alpacas.

Andrew C. Tillman