

Packing With Llamas



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Llamas' intelligence, natural agility and calm disposition make them outstanding pack animals. For over 4000 years Llamas have been used to transport goods across the rugged Andean mountains in South America. Today they are found all across the United States and Canada, carrying loads for North American backcountry travelers. Here Llamas serve as the pack animal of choice in situations that call for minimal environmental impact, ease of handling, agility and surefootedness.

Former backpackers, outdoor photographers, and public agency field crews use Llamas to take the load off their own backs.

High country fishermen enjoy casting across alpine lakes in float tubes packed in by their Llamas. Hunters successfully employ Llamas to pack game out of rugged areas that would be inaccessible to horses or mules. Families with small children have trained their Llamas to accept a lightweight rider, enabling their youngsters to take longer backcountry journeys. Commercial Llama packers have led scores of adventurous travelers on truly unique outdoor vacations with the support of their woolly packing companions.

Llamas for Packing

Male Llamas in good physical condition are best suited to packing. Both intact and gelded male Llamas make excellent packers. Many owners choose to have their pack Llamas gelded (neutered) unless they will be using them for breeding. Geldings generally tend to get along better in a herd with fewer dominance disputes. To avoid injury during normal pasture roughhousing behavior all adult males should have their fighting teeth trimmed. As social, herd-oriented animals, Llamas prefer living with other Llamas or with other herd animals such as sheep or goats.

While some female Llamas have been trained to pack, most often their value as breeding stock keeps them off the trail and in the pasture raising young Llamas. Healthy, well-trained female Llamas may be useful as packers. Their packing duties should be restricted during the three or four months prior to birthing and for a similar period after.

Once a Llama has learned to stand to be caught and be easily haltered, and will follow readily on a loose lead, he may begin pack training. During these lessons he should learn to accept a saddle on his back and cinches around his belly before being loaded with lightweight, bulky packs. Additional training should include learning to walk into a trailer and allowing his feet to be picked up for examination and trimming. Most Llamas quickly learn packing tasks when they are taught in a calm, consistent, and patient manner.

The distance a pack llama can travel is affected by its condition and natural athletic ability as well as its load and the terrain it will cover. A seasoned pack llama that is moderately loaded and in excellent physical condition should be able to cover 10-15 miles on well graded trails. Steep trails or especially heavy packs will shorten this distance. Young Llamas and those in the early stages of training will be comfortable with much shorter distances. They will also benefit from an easy hiking pace and regular rest stops along the way.

When they are between two and three years old, Llamas may begin carrying lightweight loads. At this young age they are still physically maturing and should not be asked to pack more than 40 pounds including their pack saddle. While youngsters should be limited to lightweight loads, mature Llamas three and a half to four years old and in good physical condition may carry from one quarter to one third of their optimum body weight. Any Llama that is overweight and out of condition will be limited in his ability to carry a loaded pack. At times this may cause them to lie down in the trail and pause for a brief rest. Proper conditioning is essential when owners wish to pack their Llamas with full loads and cover long distances. A healthy, well cared for Llama should be able to continue to pack for at least ten years.

Llama Packing Equipment

A variety of pack systems have been developed especially for Llamas. These usually consist of a saddle and two pack bags, often called panniers. Most systems have a method of attaching lightweight, bulky items on top. They may also feature a breast collar and rump strap (a breeching or crupper) to fasten the load more securely on the animal.

Llama pack saddles come in two basic forms: frame pack saddles and frameless "soft" pack saddles. Llama packers may choose from several different types of frame packs made from lightweight aluminum, fiberglass or wood. A frame saddle is used with a saddle blanket to protect the Llama's back. It may carry a pair of panniers or it may be used to carry loads tied on with more traditional rope hitches. Soft pack saddles are usually made from leather or another stiff material, such as cordura nylon. They usually have an internal method of padding the Llama's back along either side of its spine for the animal's comfort and protection. These saddles are used with specially designed attaching panniers.

Any type of pack saddle should be checked to assure that it fits properly on the Llama's back. With any type of saddle there should be adequate spinal clearance and care should be taken not to place heavy items directly over the llama's spine. No part of the saddle should dig into the animal's back or cause rubbing or soreness.

In addition to the rest of their camping equipment, Llama packers should take along a swivel picket stake and 10-20 foot line for staking out their Llamas in camp, a hand scales for weighing and balancing loads, a curry brush to remove debris before saddling, an extra

halter, and a ration of supplemental feed. In addition, it's important to take along a first aid kit that includes medications and equipment for treating minor Llama injuries and ailments.

The amount of supplemental feed to bring will vary depending on how much vegetation will be available during the trip. On an average trip with good grazing opportunities supplemental feed may be limited to a pound or two of grain or hay pellets for treat or catch feed. On trips that include extended travel above treeline or where edible vegetation will be limited, about one pound per Llama per day of a mixture of half corn, rolled oats, and rolled barley (COB) and half-processed hay pellets is recommended. It's best if the feed is weed free certified in order to prevent introduction of non-native seeds into backcountry environments, and is required by some national parks and forests.

Transporting Llamas to the Trailhead

Pickups with stock racks, lightweight trailers and full-size vans will easily transport one or two pack Llamas and their gear to the trailhead. Larger stock trailers may be used to transport three or more Llamas. An enclosed trailer or vehicle will protect Llamas from the elements, allowing them to ride comfortably and safely. When hauling Llamas in a covered trailer or stock rack you do not need to tie them. If using a stock rack or trailer with no roof, it's best to tie the Llamas up on a short lead so that they will not jump out if they become excited.

When traveling long distances with Llamas its a good idea to stop along the way, allowing them a little exercise and a chance to relieve themselves. After a long haul, Llamas should be given an overnight rest before carrying a loaded pack up the trail.

Pre-trip Preparations

The key to successful Llama packing is working with a healthy, well-conditioned and well-trained animal. Llamas, like people, benefit greatly by being in good shape before they're put to work carrying full loads. A pre-packing conditioning program should include regular walks with light packs, gradually working up to longer distances and heavier loads.

Vaccinating for tetanus and other livestock concerns, worming for internal parasites and keeping toes properly trimmed will also help Llamas maintain good health at home and on the trail. It's a good idea to do vaccinating, worming, and toe trimming well in advance of a pack trip to allow the Llama time for any needed recovery. Consult ILA's brochure "Llama Medical Management" for more details on Llamas' medical concerns.

Pack Llamas should have experience being saddled and carrying light loads before their first trip into the backcountry. It's also important for them to know how to safely negotiate a picket line and simple obstacles like streams and fallen logs.

Some types of plants, such as those in the azalea and delphinium families, are poisonous to Llamas and other livestock.

Llama packers should be aware of and able to identify the potentially poisonous plants in the areas they visit. Their Llamas should not be picketed near or allowed to browse on these plants.

When planning a trip on public lands, such as national parks or forests, llama packers should check with the agency in charge of administering the area. These officials can provide information on permits, trail conditions and any regulations that may apply to pack stock use.

On the Trail

Packing with Llamas is a very special experience. Besides taking the load off your back they are unique trail companions.

They often spot wildlife and other backcountry travelers well before you do. They often give vocal comments on trail conditions or their opinions about when it's time to take a break. The way they negotiate obstacles with aplomb is a never-ending marvel.

More than one Llama may be tied together to form a Llama packstring. Llamas follow one another quite naturally, and quickly learn to "line out" as they proceed up the trail. The most common method of hitching a string of Llamas together is to fasten the leadrope of the trailing Llama to the saddle of the Llama in front of him. Safety dictates that the attachment should be with a quick release knot or that a "weak link" of lighter cord or rubber should be used to allow the connection to break away if trouble arises.

Leading a string of Llamas requires that you pay extra attention. You should look back frequently to check on them and take care when negotiating obstacles.

While they may drink from streams along the trail, Llamas may also completely abstain from drinking during the hike to camp. In either case they should be offered water in the evening after their ration of supplemental feed and again in the morning before hiking.

When possible Llamas should be picketed within sight of camp, away from small trees and any potentially poisonous plants.

Because Llamas often choose the dumpiest areas in which to make their dung piles they should not be picketed too close to streams or lakes. As a safety measure, many packers attach the picket line to the stake with a piece of rubber or bungee cord. This acts as a shock absorber in case the Llama spooks and runs abruptly to the end of its rope. On layover days, the Llamas' picket sites should be moved morning and night to minimize grazing impact.

Llamas' padded feet, unobtrusive dung, and light browsing habits have a lower impact on the land than horses, mules and donkeys. In keeping with this principle, Llama packers should make a special effort to practice "no trace" camping and leave as little evidence of their visit as possible. Llama groups should set up camp and stake out Llamas away from other backcountry users to minimize social impacts. All garbage that is not burned should be packed out. Stoves should be used for cooking instead of wood fires. Human waste should be buried deeply, well away from water sources. All washing should be done away from streams and lakes. And before leaving camp, Llamas' dung piles should be dispersed.

Special considerations should be made when Llama packers meet horses and mules on the trail. These animals may become nervous or excited at their first sight of a llama piled high with a fully loaded pack. Safety dictates that Llamas, as more maneuverable animals, give right of way to riders and their pack stock by stepping off the trail several yards to allow them to pass easily. Sometimes, this means going back down the trail a ways to a wider area. And when possible, getting off below the trail is preferable to above. It's helpful for Llama packers to give a bit of warning to riders they see approaching, letting them know that they're travelling with Llamas and that they'll get off the trail at the first opportunity. A friendly greeting goes a long way toward promoting good will, reassuring the horses and mules, and seeing that all parties have a safe and pleasant encounter.

Today, Llamas are the newest pack animal to enter the North American backcountry. Many people have never seen a llama on the trail, and when llama packers meet hikers and riders they are presented with an opportunity to introduce others to the pleasures of travelling with Llamas. A bit of time spent answering questions about how much they can pack and where they come from can increase good will and acceptance of these special creatures.

A final word of caution: packing with llamas can be habit forming; you may never want to carry a backpack again! For, when handled with respect and understanding, these unique animals will continually demonstrate their natural abilities as hard working trail companions.

The Impacts of Llamas as Hiking Companions

Since the time of the Incas, llamas have patiently carried their packs across some of the roughest terrain in the world.

Today, as the effects of increased recreation on our public lands become more evident, llamas have emerged as preferred pack animals when surefootedness and minimal impact are necessary.

Well-trained llamas are easily handled. They are excellent animals for seniors or physically challenged individuals to pack, and may even be trained to accept a small child as a rider. Their size makes them easy to transport in a van or a truck. As they walk at about the same pace as a person, they make excellent hiking companions.

Social Impacts

As more and more llamas are being used as pack animals, the sight of one on the trail is becoming commonplace. With their calm disposition and gentle appearance, llamas rarely elicit a negative response in these encounters. Hikers are usually fascinated and often pause to ask handlers questions regarding their llamas.

A llama's usual reaction to strangers could be characterized as interest or curiosity. Since llamas prefer their own space, they don't crowd people, and llamas are safe pack stock to handle, as they generally do not become panicky under unusual circumstances. A recent study conducted by Utah State University in cooperation with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute found that there is little opposition to llama packing from most back country visitors. Hikers appear to consider llamas as acceptable in the back country as horses. The study showed that the greater potential for conflict exists between hikers and horseback riders rather than between hikers and llama packers. Using llamas as pack animals was perceived by hikers to cause fewer problems.

Trail Impacts

The most notable advantage of llamas is their low environmental impact. They are much smaller than most equine pack stock with the average pack llama weighing between 300-400 pounds.

A llama's foot is split into two toes, with a toenail on top and a leathery pad on the bottom. The print left in the soil is quite similar in appearance to that of an elk or deer. The design of a llama's foot allows it to spread on soft ground, thereby distributing weight over a slightly larger area. This same design allows the foot to surround and grip a surface when a llama is traveling over rocky terrain.

Llamas' legs are set well under them, allowing them to walk on extremely narrow trails; they are limited only by the width of their packs. They are capable of standing with all four feet in a small space and can easily turn around in extremely tight quarters.

Another recent study conducted by the University of Montana compared the influence of horse, llama, and foot traffic to soil erosion on established trails under both wet and dry conditions. In this study, llamas were responsible for much less erosion when compared to horses, and were found to have a similar impact to that of hikers.

Llamas are often capable of carrying loads into areas too rugged for conventional pack stock. They cross water, rocks, shale slides and can easily negotiate most trails. Llamas have not been limited to carrying supplies for back country hikers. They are used by hunters to pack a wide variety of game, by fishermen to pack float tubes up to high mountain lakes, and by Forest Service employees to carry saws and other equipment for clearing and building trails in remote and nearly inaccessible areas. This adds up to a stable yet agile pack animal that can perform well in a variety of back country conditions, in a versatile and environmentally friendly way.

Off-Trail Impacts and Grazing

The off-trail effects of llamas and horses were compared in a study conducted by the Aldo Leopold Research Institute. The results confirmed that the trampling effects on native vegetation by a llama is much less than that of a horse. Llamas have few problems negotiating picket ropes and in camp they can easily be staked out where they will lie down and quietly chew their cud after eating. Moving them once or twice a day further minimizes their impact.

Llamas are preferred grazers that also browse and are modified ruminants with a three chambered stomach. In addition to grasses, they will eat leaves, twigs, weeds, and other plants. Eating a little of this and a little of that, cafeteria style, spreads out their impact on indigenous plants. Supplemental weed-free feed can be provided if needed. Llama feces are similar in appearance to those of a deer or elk. Their small pellets of dung are deposited in a dung pile that is easily scattered with a boot or shovel. Llamas require much less to drink than most pack stock. They are members of the camel family and obtain much of their water needs from what they eat. However, this does not preclude the need to offer them water daily while on the trail.

Llamas and Wildlife

Since most wild animals have never seen a llama, they are often curious rather than frightened. They may stand and watch or circle the llamas to pick up their scent. Although llamas have been victims of bear or cougar attacks, large carnivores tend to avoid llamas as aliens. Llamas will usually sound a high pitched alarm call when these predators are in the area.

Llamas are classified as "farm animals" by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. Llamas have been studied and found to be highly resistant to major livestock diseases. There are no cases where a llama has been suspect in the transmission of any livestock disease to other livestock or wildlife. Marked anatomic and physiologic differences between camelids and ruminants exist in many organ systems. This is not surprising since camelids and ruminants have been on separate evolutionary lines for more than 40 million years. Most parasites

and diseases are species specific making the possibility of spreading disease or parasites to native wildlife extremely remote.

Llama Packers

When hiking, llamas are very quiet. They are observant and will often spot wildlife or other trail users before their human handlers do. Llama packers need to be aware of other trail users, especially horse and mule parties. Safety dictates that llamas, as the more maneuverable pack stock, should be led well off the trail, preferably downhill, when horses or mules are encountered.

Horses and mules generally become accustomed to the sight of llamas after a few encounters. This safety issue is one that is shared by both llama and equine stock users. A high risk situation can be avoided with education and training of all parties.

The llamas' low impact status is appreciated and sought out by people who are environmentally concerned. Since llamas are relatively new on the North American hiking scene, owners must become educated as to their care and handling on the trail. As low impact and unobtrusive as llamas are, they still can have an adverse effect on their environment if not handled properly. The little impact that they have is easily compensated for by awareness and action on the part of their handlers. Most businesses that lease pack llamas usually do so after the client has taken a course on llama packing. Llama associations and clubs also provide educational material for new owners on the subject of llama packing.

Information in this document was prepared in part using results of studies conducted by the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Utah State University, University of Montana, and Ricks College.

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