

It's All About the Fleece!

Adventures of a New Alpaca Breeder's First Shearing Experience

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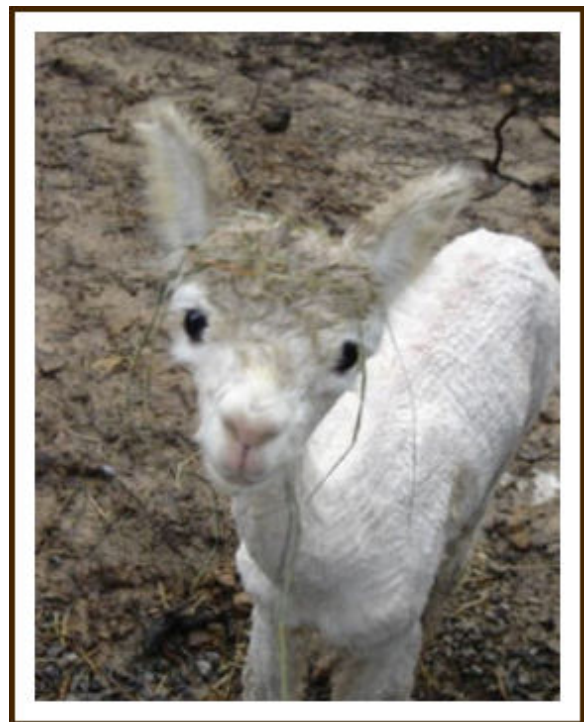
May 4, 2009: We did it! We had our first successful "clip"!

However, it wasn't without some unexpected excitement and unforeseen challenges. We rented a cargo van and got all things ready. . . halters, bags, gloves, knee pads, people and animals in preparation for a 4:00 PM departure and a 5:30 PM shearing. At 3:20 PM our carefully made plans started to unravel. We got a call from the Kreskos, the farm hosting our first shearing day. The shearers were ahead of schedule and we needed to be at the farm in 40 minutes - an hour and a half earlier than we expected!

Since we had never loaded our animals into a vehicle before, let alone walked them anywhere on a lead, it was obvious this was not going to be an ordinary day. Instead of the nice relaxed pace of leading them into the van, we needed to get them in and fast! But, first we had to call our young neighbor Emily, who wanted to come along for the big adventure. We hoped her parents could get her to our house so that we could leave within 15 minutes. Luckily, they all immediately hopped in the car and arrived in time. We actually had two extra helpers, which as it turned out, we really needed.

I was able to halter Ishtar and lead her to the van. However, when she saw it, she cushed and would not get up. We tried lifting her and nudging her and she finally rose. Just then, the next unplanned issue presented itself. We needed a ramp for the van! Fortunately, my husband Jay had positioned a piece of plywood to act as a fence between the actual fence and the van (we haven't got lane ways YET). We took it and made it a ramp. Emily's parents filled-in as human fencing. Ishtar got up the ramp with a little slippage and Emily got in

and held her back while Jay, our son Jack and I tried to get the others, who by this time had wandered off to graze. After a little bit of herding, Jack grabbed Hamilton and carried him into the van. Much to our surprise, the rest of the animals followed! We were on our way and reached our destination at 4:10! Not bad for beginners!



I may look like E.T. now, but before my haircut, I was handsome (Hamilton)

Once at the Kresko's, the fun began! As each animal was brought in, it was weighed and readied for shearing.

The set-up was for one alpaca to be restrained for toenail clipping and any needed shots, then shorn, while the next one was poised and waiting for its turn. We all had jobs. For each station, people held the alpaca while others fastened loops around each foot. The alpaca is gently lowered to the mat and the ropes pulled

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taut so that it cannot kick anyone or hurt itself. Then someone swoops-in and clips the nails and gives injections. Our skilled shearers, Jamie and Matt, begin shearing. First the blanket (prime) is removed and collected all in one piece, then the neck (2nds), and then the legs (some not worth saving). The ropes must be frequently tightened or loosened to enable the shearer to turn the animal or get between the front legs.

The object is for this all to be done like a fluid dance with all parties knowing their jobs and when to do them, and especially to stay out of the shearers way, and yet close enough to do the job! If this sounds like a tough thing to accomplish you are right. Keep in mind that it is all done in about 4 minutes per animal without any mishaps or injuries to anyone or any animal!!! Some of our alpacas cried and bawled, but I think it was mostly due to the indignity and strangeness of it. If you could have seen Ishtar get up, I swear if she could have, she would have smoothed her hair, brushed off her shoulders, given us all a cold glare, and walked off with a huff and as much dignity as she could muster!

In all of my reading, it is recommended to stage the alpacas with the lightest animals first and work up to the darkest to avoid mixing darker fibers with light. In reality, the order pretty much depends on who is set-up and ready to go first. Since ours were the last to be shorn, I asked the shearers if they would mind doing all of mine on one mat to avoid being contaminated with all of the other colors. No matter how hard you try to clean the mat between each animal (and I was meticulous at my station!), some fleece seems to find it's way back and I figured that mine would only be contaminated with similar colors. So at the risk of behaving like a diva, I asked for special treatment! Not only that, but I wanted a bigger fleece sample for the [Ideal Alpaca Community](#) and I wanted it from a specific place on the

animal! Jamie and Matt were very happy to oblige, thank goodness! Shearing of our four alpacas went very smoothly despite many strange noises!

The Kreskos invited us to stay for a pot luck meal afterwards and we gladly accepted. There was ham barbecue, kolbassi and kraut, no bakes, dirt, and I brought my chocolate angel food cake (made from scratch no less!). I've noticed that many alpaca events wrap-up with food and fellowship. We've met so many nice people in this alpaca adventure! Yesterday we added Betty, Dan, Lori, Derek, Barb, Carmen, a nice young marine, and so many others whose names I can't remember.

We thanked our hosts and all who helped us and headed home. When we arrived, we found it was much easier to unload our alpacas. They were so glad to be in a familiar place! They leapt from the van and ran up to the barn!! We all laughed at how easy it was and what we had accomplished today!

Our alpacas are no longer fluffy and huggable. They look like E.T. with their long skinny necks and huge eyes! They are so thin without fleece!! I gave them extra food last night and this morning. Unfortunately, it is raining like mad and the temperature has dropped a bit, and I have seen them go into the barn and huddle together for warmth!

I can't wait to get the results of our fleece samples to figure out what characteristics we have in our herd and what we may need to add with our next breeding. For now anyway, their work is finished and the alpacas can relax, graze and work on growing their fleece for next year and their crias! I'll be busy getting our fleece ready for processing!

For more about our experiences, and fun videos, please visit our website at <http://www.laurelhighlandsalpacas.com>.