

## **OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PASTURE**

### **The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

Our llamas have added much to our lives. We have had tears of joy and tears of sorrow, but overall our interface with our llamas has been a very positive experience even when events have been negative. This spring has been no exception.

We have been anticipating several births this spring. For reasons I do not understand I felt uncomfortable during the last stage of the pregnancy of Maracaibo. Whether it was coincidence or I had sensed something awry I will never know, but we were ultimately faced with a particularly nasty dystocia. We lost the cria but saved Maracaibo.

In what follows I risk being called an anthropomorphist. But it is a risk I am willing to take because my lifetime of observations have demonstrated to me that there is a much more to the interface between humans and other animals than many animal behaviorists are willing to accept.

Over the years we have become convinced that llamas know when they are in trouble and will seek our help. We are also convinced that the herd often knows, before we do, that a member of the herd is in trouble. I believe that observation of herd behavior is an important part of herd management.

Maracaibo is not our most sociable llama. As a matter of fact she has a bit of an attitude. If our female herd were to take a vote on which of them is the most popular, Maracaibo would probably come in near the bottom. She can be a bit aggressive when food is near.

Our first visible sign that Maracaibo was in trouble occurred when a group of our llamas formed a defensive line in front of Maracaibo to shield her from the other females who were racing across the field to see what was going on. Within a few minutes of that occurrence Maracaibo came to the fence line to see me. I had the distinct feeling that she was asking me to help her.

After a difficult process to remove the cria, Maracaibo came up to me and nuzzled my face as if to thank me for helping her. After a minute with me she then went over to Jeanne and did the same thing. For the next five days whenever I went out to give her a penicillin injection she would stand up (if kushed), take a few steps and then wait for me to give the injection. These behaviors were not typical of Maracaibo. I am happy to report that her recovery has gone well and she is back to being a llama with an attitude. I have also learned the hard way that I

need to listen to my intuition even though there is no hard evidence to back it up.

Seabreeze, in contrast to Maracaibo, does not walk around with an “attitude”. We often refer to her as our “gentle giant”. She has a body score of 6 at 460 pounds and has a very quiet, easy-going demeanor. Last spring we bred Seabreeze using Easy Wynn, a Classic American Llama, as the stud. Seabreeze’s prior maternal experiences were on another farm. We had been told that she was a “good mother”. I was a bit unprepared for her “mothering” when Spitfire was born after a 362 day gestation period. (The cria’s name sprang into my mind within a few minutes of her birth because she literally hit the ground running.)

With Spitfire testing her legs in about 10 minutes and showing a strong sucking reflex, I had anticipated that Seabreeze would respond by immediately presenting herself for nursing. Instead she would repeatedly get behind Spitfire and placing a front leg between Spitfire’s rear legs she would lift her off the ground and thrust her forward a few feet. After pondering this behavior for a few minutes I decided that Seabreeze was encouraging Spitfire to develop her running capabilities.

Seabreeze then started to graze the pasture. When Spitfire approached Seabreeze from the side to find her teats, Seabreeze would continue walking and grazing thus frustrating any nursing attempt. After about an hour of this I decided to intervene and went to place Spitfire in an advantageous position. Seabreeze immediately whirled around so that she would face me. This dance continued for several minutes until Seabreeze let me know in no uncertain terms (a fresh green honorarium on my cap) that she knew more about mothering than I did. At that point I decided to retire to a position about 100 feet away. I watched the scene through a pair of binoculars and soon noticed Spitfire approaching Seabreeze from the back whereupon she placed her head between the back legs of her mother and began to nurse. This position worked quite well when Seabreeze was walking and grazing. Even at 100 feet I could hear a healthy sucking sound. Spitfire soon added a more normal approach to her nursing repertoire. I should add that Seabreeze and Spitfire both hummed more loudly and more frequently than other mother/cria combinations on our farm.

Once Seabreeze straightened me out on the mothering question, she felt very relaxed about my taking Spitfire away to be weighed.

When it comes to feeding Spitfire has been a bit precocious. She began to nibble at the grass at the

beginning of her third day. On her fourth day she was eating hay with a group of our other llamas at the hay feeder. At her current growth pace I anticipate that she will become one of our larger llamas.

The lesson I learned from Seabreeze was that there are times when I should go sit on my hands and leave the mothering to the experts.