

Alpaca Births & Cria

Alpacas, as every alpaca-breeder will tell you are wonderful, amazing animals that are fabulous to keep, and easy to farm. They have great personalities, are intelligent and often amusing.

We love and enjoy our alpacas. We wouldn't give them away for anything!

We have been farming alpacas for 5 years, and to quote the song "problems, we've had a few." Alpacas are not always hassle free, but once you know what you are doing and have a solid approach based on sound information and best practice, then the problems are not insurmountable.

Surilox Alpacas is based in the Hunter / Mid North Coast region of NSW & while we are in drought, we haven't been as badly effected as the rest of Australia. Yes, the grass is sometimes crunchy, but we have a spring and can irrigate, we have access to good hard feed, with a good mate who grows the best lucerne hay.

We also feed a Pat Coleby-type muesli with lots of good mineral supplements every day to every alpaca, both owned by us & those agisted with us; the alpacas on our farm are generally fat and sassy, with a body score of around 3 -3.5 and I am sure that this helps them remain relatively problem free.

For those wondering what I am talking about; Pat Coleby is an agricultural consultant to Australian farmers who believes in natural and sympathetic animal husbandry. She has written some really interesting books.

So in general, it is true, we have few problems raising alpacas. Our alpacas are happy and healthy.

But we have had some issues, and they are issues / problems that any alpaca breeder in Australia might encounter. Probably the most worrying issue is the thought of one of your precious girls having a problem birth.

As a rule alpacas usually give birth in the morning. It makes sense for an animal that lives at altitude, where nightfall brings temperatures of -10 °C, to give birth early in the morning. This is so the cria dries, stands, suckles and finds its legs long before it has to survive its first night and possibly its first predator.

We have had one cria born at 8 pm on an extremely hot day in the middle of summer. Mum had been in labour in the morning, but this stopped as soon as the temperature hit 40°C. Then just after their evening feed, just as the sun wandered over the horizon and the cool breeze appeared, so did the cria. What sensible mums these alpacas are!

Most of our cria have come around morning-tea time, the birth has been easy, and there has been little to no human intervention necessary.

But my advice, especially to new breeders is "Don't count on it." Be prepared & all will be well.

So here are the few problems that we've encountered, and they have been interesting. Strangely enough, each problem has been of the nature so that the information and skills learned from the previous problem has been the first step in approach to the next problem.

I must say that the best place to gain knowledge about birthing is advice from other alpaca breeders and the excellent article written by vet Richard Dixon about problem births. We found this in a past issue of one of the AAA's [Aust. Alpaca Association's] Regional

Magazines. I have the reference details if anyone wants them, email me. Oh & Thank you Richard.

There are 3 stages of birthing in an alpaca.

Signs of Impending Birth

- Mum sits with her legs forward & high on her knees
- Mum flicks her tail a lot [and flies are not the reason]
- Mum's shape changes as cria moves into position for birth
- Mum's udder fills with milk & teats swell [although this is not always an indication of impending birth, we have a girl who shows these signs from around 6 months]
- Mum rolls onto her side, and sits this way. We've seen this often around 4-7 evenings prior to the actual birth
- Mum sits separate to the rest of the herd & often with her back to everyone else
- Mum's rear end shows signs of cria stretching its legs. What I mean here is that you can see cria action high under the tail, it is almost as if mums rear end gets triangular for around 20 seconds or so, every so often, in time with contractions
- Mum lifts her tail rhythmically, or walks around with her tail held high. This can indicate contractions
- Mum goes to the poo pile often and produces little to no waste

Stages 1 & 2 have some or all of the signs above

Stage 3 – the cria appears. The first thing out in a normal birth is the cria's nose. This should be followed by the front feet over the cria's head. The cria often just hangs there for a while, mouth working, breath dragging in and out, a little coughing to clear the lungs, while mum calmly has a graze.

Some moaning or sneezing from the cria can be expected. This is the only time that we have ever seen an alpaca breathe through its mouth.

The next couple of contractions and the cria is dropped, usually reasonably gently, to the ground, wet, covered in the birth sac. The baby now has to find sitting position. This can take as little as a few minutes to 10 minutes. The time taken depends on the development of the cria and possibly even the heat of the day. Most of our cria have attempted to stand within approximately 20 minutes and are looking for a feed within the hour.

Afterbirth follows around 20 minutes later.

The sac will dry & fall off the cria without any interference from mum; alpacas don't lick their young clean.

You can tell when a cria is hungry. The little mouth is working and the tip of the tongue can be seen, often curled a little as if searching for the teat.

Now here is the most frustrating thing for the observer...The cria will look for milk everywhere except at the udders. It seems to take forever for the little guy or girl to find the milk bar. They look at mum's shoulder, at her legs, around the front, along the side, even occasionally sniffing around an aunty. I can absolutely attest to my desire to assist the cria find mums teats. Trust me when I say that it rarely helps. It is unusual for the cria to not find the milk.

If the cria is unable to find milk after 4 hours or so, and becomes flat and totally lethargic, a colostrum replacement in a syringe gently squeezed into the mouth, or even some glucose at this time will do wonders. We have a commercial bovine colostrum replacer at hand, especially if births occur in really hot weather, so it is not really a problem. We also have Glucodin in powder form, & some liquid glucose to mix with warm water. Any of these 3 is fine. As a last resort I would use a teaspoon of honey in 300 mls of water rather than sugar. But if you only have sugar & water, use that. So choose glucose, then fructose rather than lastly sucrose.

The cria should perk up really quickly and soon start to nose around for a proper feed.

One of the delights of an alpaca birth is the herd greeting the cria gets. They are such curious animals! Everyone comes to say hello. Everyone has a good sniff and stands around making themselves known.

Problem Birth No 1. - The Maiden Birth

We had been watching Buffy [we didn't name her] for several days. She was obviously in labour, having given all the usual signs of imminent birth. We knew she was in labour, but Peter had to go off farm for a couple of hours. I kept an eye on her & she was obviously in stage 3, the cria's nose just appearing. The contractions continued and the cria's nose kept being sucked back in, and then being pushed out. This continued for way too long. At this stage 10 minutes can be too long. The placenta is separating from the mum, and there is a limited amount of time that the cria can survive.

I was on my own, & Buffy was [& still is] not the most amenable of our girls. She does not like being handled. As our vet is a good 45 – 60 minutes drive away, calling the vet was not an option. I decided to call a neighbour for assistance.

It took 4 calls before I found someone home, & he appeared at my side some time later, it could have been 5 minutes, it could have been 10, I don't know. I was just pleased to see him. Meanwhile I washed my hands really well, retrieved my birthing supplies – plastic bags for the afterbirth, olive oil [it's what I had handy, but if you can plan ahead, buy some ky jelly & put it in your kit], chloramide to spray the umbilicus and the mum.

Chloramide is an antiseptic and repels flies. We use it on mums behind and the cria's umbilicus to keep flies and infection away.

Once John D was there we cornered the heavily uncomfortable girl, and John D kept her still, standing at the head end. I oiled up and in I went.

Following the written instructions from Richard Dixon, I gently slipped my fingers under the cria's chin and put my thumb in its mouth and oh so cautiously pulled her out a little. I then used the fingers of both hands to feel for the legs. Yep there they were, above her head, but there was no room to get them out. The mum just was not really dilating enough, and the cria was in distress. The cria's mouth was gasping for air and Buffy was in obvious pain – she was yelling & spitting. Here is where you get to have a quiet smile because you are not the person at the spitting end of the alpaca!

So the next step was to gently push the edges of the vulva back and encourage the head to slip out past the eyes.

Getting the head out was much more difficult and frustrating than it sounded. You have to be so careful not to damage the cria's eyes. After some careful fiddling, pushing and stretching the vulva, encouraging the skin to move back, the cria's head moved out & as the eyes became visible and out, the legs popped out without any huge fuss.

Don't grab the little feet & just pull. I have since heard horrendous tales from a vet about damage caused by over fast manual deliveries. Just use gentle, really gentle but constant pressure & time it for when the mum is having a contraction.

The next contraction delivered the neck. This did take some help, and you have to be careful not to pull too hard, nor too abruptly because the chances of damaging the newborn is great.

So now we have Buffy's first cria hanging out, taking its first breaths including coughs and splutters.

The rest was anticlimactic although the shoulders were very tight, after that the cria slid out quite easily. The cria sat, stood, walked and fed all quite normally. & I felt very clever indeed.

But we've had this problem 3 times in total, which is highly unusual, once with Buffy's full sister. The latest was last week. All 3 cria are well and beautiful.

Problem Birth No 2

My phone rang as I was walking into a business meeting in the city. "A Girl" says Peter. "She's brown and gorgeous, but very small."

"How small?" "3 ½ kg or perhaps less."

What great news to carry with me while working! But downhill it went from there. 2 hours into my meeting, Peter called to say that the cria still hadn't put its head up. That's when I realised that Peter had said that the cria was only 3 ½ kg!

I rushed out of my meeting, to start the 4 hour drive to the farm cursing the peak hour traffic that added an extra hour to the journey.

All I could think about was why an experienced mum, who had had healthy cria before, should produce a weak & undersized cria. After all, the mum had good feed, plenty of mineral, good water, was healthy...

I rang Peter and suggested "Colostrum orally by syringe right now! At least 20 ml, and then try to milk the mum."

Unfortunately the mum had no milk, at all. So Peter gave the little girl a few mils of bovine colostrum every 20 minutes. After another 2 hours the cria had succeeded in getting her head up, but she didn't have the strength to hold it still or up for long.

By the time I got home Peter has stood the cria up, and she had taken a few supported steps. It is important for any alpaca to be able to sit and stand. Their digestive system is not designed for the animal to be lying down.

We called the cria Corazon, which in spanish means Heart. And she has heart, this little cria; she's a fighter. She fought every minute of the next 3 weeks to stay with us.

The teat used for a cria is called a flutter teat. It is available from a few places. Being rural and remote, we use Farmers Mail Box, which is a mail order delivery service. The flutter teat screws on the end of a drinkl water bottle – we use a 300 ml mineral water bottle as it is a convenient size.

It took 2 days for her to learn how to suck from that bottle. At first she didn't or perhaps couldn't suck.

To encourage sucking I sat on the ground with the cria in my lap, her head resting on my

chest. I worked my clean fore-finger into her mouth & guided the teat in so it rested on her tongue. It was then a matter of squeeze & tickle.

That is: squeeze the bottle to give her some warm milk, and use your finger to tickle the side of the cria's tongue to get it to swallow.

We did this every 2 hours for the next 3 days. The idea is to get around 10% of the cria's body weight of formula in mls, into the little thing per day.

After 2 days she learned that the bottle was really good. Her suck became stronger & stronger. By the end of those 2 days she was standing and even walking a little.

By the time she gained enough strength to stand and move like a newborn, she started to refuse to sit in my lap to eat.

At the time of writing this she is 6 weeks old, still tiny, but strong and determined. Actually she is smaller than a cria born a couple of days ago, but she's here – that's all that counts.

What did we do?

- Bovine Colostrum replacer every 2 hours for 3 days
- Alpaca Milk Replacer [Wombaroo is what we used but you could use DiVetelac, some people use cow's milk] every 3 hours for 3 weeks at a rate of 10% of the cria's body weight in mls per day. We added a tablespoon of non-sweetened high acidophilus yoghurt to the bottle to encourage her gut flora and minimise the runs
- The bottles & teats used were cleaned after every feed, just as if Corazon were a human baby, because after all she had as little resistance to infection as a human baby
- We handled her and her milk equipment with absolutely clean hands
- We also for the first 3 days ran our clean fingers inside mum's mouth & transferred her enzyme rich saliva into the cria's mouth. Cria are born without any gut flora, so this is very important

More Advice

- have a mobile phone or portable phone with you, so you can call for help from the paddock
- have a birthing kit which includes gloves, chloramide, plastic bags, glucose, ky jelly or olive oil
- have an emergency kit which includes a piglet or kid [goat] resuscitation device. We've never had to use ours, and hope we never have to. Add flutter teats to the emergency kit, a thermometer too! We also have vitamins ADE, VAM – vitamins & minerals, some antibiotics, and analgesics appropriate to alpacas
- We believe that having all equipment possible means that with luck we might never have to use it. But the truth is having everything that you might need means that you are prepared for that one time where things don't go as planned
- Give a colostrum replacement soon & often. A newborn cria will suck eagerly if it has been born mature, but a dysmature cria probably won't be able to suck
- To encourage swallowing insert the flutter teat into the baby's mouth & tickle its tongue with your clean finger

- Have a 1 kg bag of Wombaroo Alpaca milk replacer in your vet fridge [or whatever you choose to use] & keep a 500g jar of Impact Colostrum Replacer [this is bovine colostrum but it works]
- Read lots, talk to the vet, do courses, talk to other alpaca breeders, subscribe to alpaca chat-rooms, join an alpaca association
- We keep many items to treat our alpacas in a dedicated fridge on our farm
- I am lucky - I spend time, occasionally, with our vet, at his practice. I also spend time occasionally with a close friend who is also a vet. Because our vet can't always come to us, he is happy to help us by making sure that we can handle the day to day and the unusual. He is also ready to give phone consults whenever we need them. Speak to your vet & see what level service he's comfortable with
- Speak to the breeders that you buy your alpacas from. Ask to assist during a normal drenching day – you'll learn lots
- Stay calm, do the same sensible thing that you would do for a sick child
- Have a sense of humour, love your alpacas

They are wonderful, responsive and rewarding. For anyone who is thinking of buying their first alpacas, I think that you'll fall as completely under their spell as we have. If you are not convinced, come up to our farm and have a look...

Remember problem births are really unusual. Most alpaca births are quick, trouble-free and a joy to watch.

Corazon is gambolling with the other cria. She occasionally steals milk from their mums. She is still tiny and she runs to us when she sees us, humming and chuckling [that lovely clicking noise that mums & bubs make to each other], and we hum and chuckle back, then give her her next bottle. She's down to 5 hourly feeds and has even refused a bottle in favour of hay.

I am writing this as all the cria in the paddock are neck wrestling and frolicking. Could there be a better outlook anywhere?

Karine Raiz & Peter Feldman

Surilox Alpacas 65 healthy Suri & Huacaya alpacas and climbing! 12 more due next week!