

Alpaca Article

Weaning by Amy Haldane

Where, I keep asking myself did this year go? A few smart Alecs in the office are bound to say that I spent half of it in Africa. I did come back though and it's now time for some of our first cria of 1999 to be weaned. I may have missed out on their births but have managed to drag myself out of a warm office to introduce myself to a few who recently parted from their mothers in a different fashion. Some of the new 'weanlings' have managed this transition in a slightly more dignified and definitely less slimy manner than they did 6 months ago.

Weaning is never a particularly enjoyable time of year for any of us. But we get on and do it, knowing that the animals quickly adapt and slip into a new routine, making new friends amongst their peers. Before we know it, mum is about to deliver another cria, the 'baby' girls are ready for mating and the 'baby' boys are still, well, being boys!

So, why do we wean?

If the mother is pregnant again there is always the risk that she will lose condition and risk the pregnancy if she continues to nurse a cria for too long. I think one of the most important reasons to wean is that if the cria is still with its mother at the time she is ready to give birth again chances are the older cria will try to suckle from its mother. This presents the danger that the new-born does not have access to a good milk supply and the precious first milk (colostrum) vital for its well being. It is unfair to think that a newborn can compete with a bolshy older cria who is probably feeling extremely jealous and put out.

Young males playing at mating their mothers can be highly amusing and endearing but this play can usually only be tolerated to a point before it becomes irritating and a real nuisance. They can become extremely boisterous and unfortunately start to try to mate with younger cria who are more likely to get injured because of the size difference. So there comes a point where weaning becomes a safety precaution for the younger members of the herd.

Wean larger cria, especially females before attempting paddock mating.

How to wean:

There are no real hard and fast rules on how to wean, but some ways definitely seem to make the whole process much easier. Like the bulk of alpaca management address weaning with common-sense, adapt to changes and do what best suits your alpacas.

Ideally take cria away from mum and put in another field with a companion or other weaned cria out of sight of the dam.

Make sure that the field is secure. Cria are more likely to find their way out of a field by going under gates or slack fencing than by jumping out and can be veritable little Houdinis.

If you have enough stock and space to do this male and female cria could be separated into different fields at weaning. In theory males could be fertile as young as nine months though they are not likely to start working until they are 18 months or older. The young males tend to play harder and can pester the females. They will have to be separated at some stage if they are not castrated and sometimes it's much easier to start as you mean to go on.

When to wean:

Wean at about 6 months. Slightly earlier if the mother is losing condition and the cria is taking hard food.

Crias that are very small for their age may be kept on a little longer. You may find though that they actually do better once weaned onto concentrates.

It is best to wean cria with other cria or with a companion (a gelded male or non-lactating female). The mother also needs to have company. Obviously this can pose problems for people with very small herds.

Lack of land may pose another problem. It makes sense to wean cria out of sight of their mothers to avoid the inevitable pacing up and down fence lines trying to reunite. Even though it can be done in sight of each other, it will probably take longer, be more distressing for you to watch and you must make sure that the fenceline is secure with no risk of the cria hurting itself. Definitely not a good idea to attempt this if you have a barbed wire fence between them!

What if I can't wean at 6 months?

If you do not have enough stock to provide companions for the female and cria, the cria could be kept on longer providing the dams' condition is not suffering. If the cria is female it may be

possible if she has grown out well she could be sent off to stud slightly earlier and kept there until ready to be mated, leaving the dam to have her new cria in peace. Ask your local stud farm if they would be willing to do this. Try your best to have the cria separated from mum well before 10.5 months of gestation, in case the new cria is born early.

Someone may also be kind enough to lend you a gelding or non-breeding female as a companion for a short time. Ask around if you are experiencing difficulties, I'm sure someone will be able to help.

The cria could be put back in with its mother after about 6 weeks, though it's probably best to keep the young males separated, especially if they are still entire.

Weaning is a fairly heartbreaking time, mum and baby have had a strong bond and it will take a few weeks for them to settle down again. The babies also make the most pitiful cries, but thankfully nothing that compares with the persistent bleating of newly weaned lambs, guaranteed to keep you awake at night.

Once the cria have become accustomed to the severing of the apron strings this is a perfect time to start halter training and to get your babies familiar with being handled. They are an ideal size to halter train and shouldn't be too set in their ways.

Amy Haldane