

Raising Alpacas on a Dry Lot & Normal Alpaca Behavior



By Julie Roy

Raising Alpacas on a Dry Lot & Normal Alpaca Behavior

The following transcripts are from a conversation with Cindy Harris and Julie Roy. Cindy owns the largest alpaca farm in Southern California, Alpacas at Windy Hill She has been in the alpaca industry since 2000 and offers the full service of boarding (agisting), breeding, marketing and sales for alpaca owners who keep their alpacas at her ranch. Julie Roy purchased her first 2 alpacas from Cindy in the fall of 2004 and offered agisting and brokering services before her retirement in 2017. Note: Cindy is still an active breeder, though the numbers in herd may fluctuate monthly.

Table of Contents

How To Go From 2 To Over 300 So Quickly And Successfully.....	2
Feeding on a Dry Lot	5
Three Levels Of Feeding Aggressions	6
Assessing Body Condition With Your Hand.....	7
Weekly Vet Visit Day	7
Tips on Observing Behavior – What’s Normal and What’s Not	9

Julie Roy: So Cindy, you have over 300 alpacas as of today, now I certainly know that you started like most of us with just a few and with a dream that has grown over time and certainly has evolved from your original plan. Would you mind giving us a brief background of when you started and what your initial decisions were in starting a ranch?

How To Go From 2 To Over 300 So Quickly and Successfully

Cindy Harris: Well, I was living in the city, teaching school and I had always wanted to have my horse at home so I went looking for rural properties. Instead of the one-acre I was looking for, I ended up with fourteen and I needed a way to make that property pay its own property taxes. So, people advised me to look for avocados or something like that and finally a friend introduced me to alpacas and since I was already feeding a horse and cleaning up after him, it wasn't much of a stretch to think about taking a couple of little alpacas' home. So, I did.

Julie Roy: All right, then what?

Cindy Harris: That year for the first time in, well, probably my entire life I got money back on my taxes.

Julie Roy: What year was that Cindy?

Cindy Harris: That was January of 2000, from there; well it was an *El Nino* winter, so my main goal that first winter was to keep my alpacas from drowning.

Julie Roy: I can understand – buckets of rain to contend with!

Cindy Harris: I learned a lot about what to feed them to keep weight on them in the cold, so it was quite an adventure. I was pretty much by myself, getting up at five o'clock in the morning, going down, feed, cleaning, crawling back up the hill, changing out of my mud clothes, taking a shower, and going to work. Coming back and doing the same thing in the evening.

Julie Roy: You started with how many exactly?

Cindy Harris: I started with two females, one of whom, who had a young male at her side and then I had a llama, because I was out in the hills and I wanted to have something that would make coyotes think twice.

Julie Roy: Understood. Were these huacayas or suris?

Cindy Harris: They were huacaya. That was all that I had seen, so I thought that was the extent of what alpacas were.

Julie Roy: All right, so lets fast forward, at the end of your first year, what had you done?

Cindy Harris: Well, by the end of the first year, I worked teaching school the rest of that school year, so it ended in June and told them at the end of that school year that I would take a leave of absence, because my father was ill and I needed to spend some time with him. So, I took a leave of absence from teaching that following year, people started calling, and saying, gee you've got all that space over there. The people that I bought my alpacas from don't have room to keep them for me, can I bring them and would you keep them for me? So, I thought, well, yeah sure, why not? What else have I got to do? So, I put up more fences...

Julie Roy: Yes!

Cindy Harris: More shelters. My goal was to board enough alpacas that other people's alpacas would pay my own alpaca expenses.

Julie Roy: That makes a lot of good business sense.

Cindy Harris: Yeah, by the end of the summer, I had about twenty or twenty-five animals on the property and only three or four of them were mine and it just kept going.

Julie Roy: Okay, what we can gather by what you just said is that within the span of a year, you can go from thinking about having a couple of alpacas and grow an actual business to the point where, you're now starting to not only cover your own feed expenses for your animals and use of your land, but you're starting to make money, aren't you?

Cindy Harris: Yes, uh-huh. It was really sort of startling.

Julie Roy: Because this evolved from the idea of becoming an alpaca owner to now becoming a successful business owner.

Cindy Harris: Right and it was rolling along so well, that by the end of the next school year, when the district asked me to decide whether I was going to teach or not, I decided to take another year's leave. I was allowed two years of leave without any loss of status in the school district. So, I thought, I had nothing to lose and I was very excited about the way the business was going and I didn't want to slow down.

Julie Roy: I see. So now, let's say that's brought us up to, something like mid 2002 and you probably have found that there's been some exponential growth in your own herd?

Cindy Harris: And how!

Julie Roy: You've taken on the agisting of additional animals.

Cindy Harris: Right.

Julie Roy: And then I know from what you've shared with me in the past, that the first fourteen acres soon got too small, that you needed something larger.

Cindy Harris: That's right, so in 2003 I could see that I was starting to push the limits of my property. Now not all my fourteen acres were useable, because it was quite hilly.

Julie Roy: I can understand that, too.

Cindy Harris: Most of us in Southern California are in that position, so I asked my realtor to start scouting around to see if she could find me more property and she found me a piece of land twenty-five acres of flat land, not very far from where I was already.

Julie Roy: All right.

Cindy Harris: At first, I thought that it was a great idea. I think now, I must have been a little bit crazy, because there was nothing on the land except weeds and a well. That was it. In the space of three or four months, we managed to put up almost four miles of parameter fence and move 150 alpacas over here. My ranch manager and I both lived in trailers for a year and a half, while we built houses and all sorts of things. I was able to sell the old ranch, so that I could develop the new one. It was a lot of hard work, but I think it's been well worth it. Of course, we're not finished yet.

Julie Roy: Do you still have a lot more room to expand on your twenty-five acres?

Cindy Harris: Yes, a lot more space to expand and much more development to do. Now we are trying to put in irrigation lines and get some nice watered pasture going on, we've got some but limping along on eighteen gallons a minute from my house.

Julie Roy: Oh.

Cindy Harris: So, we are going to put another well in and then we'll really get busy on the grass.

Feeding on a Dry Lot

Julie Roy: When I've visited your place I noticed that it is very well organized in terms of the animals being fed on what we call a "dry lot." They are not actually eating pasture grass all the time, but rather you've got large corral areas. Then you have small pens for different uses. Can you just tell us a little bit about the benefit that you see from having your alpacas on dry lot, when you don't have the actual pasture to be feeding them?

Cindy Harris: Well, dry lot works really well. I think ideally alpacas would love to be on pasture, but inevitably they are going to start to gain lots of weight on pasture and they're going to need to be taken off it anyway. So, the dry lot works extremely well. The key to dry lot is keeping the poop raked up everyday to cut down on your flies and parasites and, provide enough feeders.

Julie Roy: So explain to us what you mean by that.

Cindy Harris: Well, alpacas in their natural state spread out to eat. If you look at them out in the pasture, where they are grazing, everybody's got a lot of space around them. They're all together out there, but their spread out and nobody has anybody competing for food. Well, if you put them in a dry lot situation and make specific places where the food is placed but it's too close together, now they are going to have to compete for food and that raises their stress level. The ones that are shy about eating will get pushed out. Now you have management issues that you wouldn't have if you were in a place that provided acres and acres of green grass all the time.

Julie Roy: Right.

Cindy Harris: So, I try to have enough space so that every single alpaca can be at the feeders all at once, without feeling crowded. You just must keep adding feeders until you achieve that.

Julie Roy: Do you observe the alpacas as they're eating to determine that one is not getting enough food, or one is getting too much food, or you need to add more?

Cindy Harris: Yeah.

Julie Roy: Or do you have a rule of thumb for how many alpacas in some square space area?

Cindy Harris: I actually listen to figure that out, because if they're crowded, they'll do a lot of quibbling, a lot of spitting and posturing over who's going to get to the feeder first. Now there's always a little bit of that.

Julie Roy: I certainly know that with my own alpacas.

Cindy Harris: When there is a lot of that going on, you don't have enough feeders.

Julie Roy: So, to picture what we're talking about, basically, if there's a lot of jockeying for position, or one of the alpacas ends up being very green because somebody is dominant. Then you don't have enough feeders for that corral.

Three Levels of Feeding Aggressions

Cindy Harris: Right, exactly. Now, what we do here, because we have so many and when you're in a very small situation you just must figure out how to make that work. But, we have three levels of what we call feeding aggressions.

Julie Roy: Oh! Let's talk about that.

Cindy Harris: Okay, well I have one very large pasture area that houses what I consider my aggressive eaters. These are the dominant females that probably, if they were out in the wild, they would own their own little band of females, they're dominant. They are going to push their way in no matter what. So, I put them all together so that they are all competing on an equal playing field and then everyone gets to eat.

Julie Roy: All right.

Cindy Harris: Then I have what I think of as the moderate eaters or the normal girls. There's a little pecking order stuff going on, but basically everybody peacefully coexists and everybody gets to eat. Then there are the shy eaters who won't eat if you look at them cross-eyed.

Julie Roy: So they're shy not only of alpacas, but also of humans as well.

Cindy Harris: Everything, yeah. If they're in the group with the moderate eaters, they'll get thin because if one of the other ones looks at her and says this is my feeder, she says, oh, never mind I'm not hungry anyway. I'll go sit over here. So, I have those girls out on the grass full time. We don't have a lot of grass so that's a very privileged position.

Julie Roy: I see.

Cindy Harris: But that way they keep their weight up and they stay healthy. So, it's a small group and you just know this by observing them. Just like, you would know the personalities of your own children.

Julie Roy: Or any other pet, really.

Cindy Harris: You're just going to learn who they are and what their tolerance level is. If one starts getting thin and the others are getting fat, then you know what's going on.

Assessing Body Condition with Your Hand

Julie Roy: Now how do you determine if they're thin or fat, Cindy?

Cindy Harris: Well, I use a quick body score method. Basically, it's a method of putting your hands on them and feel the level of the slope over the spine and how much fat they have on their chest or if their hip bones show.

Julie Roy: So, you must do this by actually touching them, you can't do it just by looking at them. Is that right?

Cindy Harris: Well, you can kind of do it by looking at them with Suri's because the fiber lays flat against their bodies. But on a huacaya, with the fleece standing out particularly later through the winter and early spring before shearing, it's almost impossible to tell just by looking at them.

Julie Roy: You taught me about body scoring in the very beginning. As you get used to being around your animals, you touch them; just by quickly putting your hand on the back of their spine and make a comparison from the last time you checked them, is that right?

Cindy Harris: Exactly. Also, of course we weigh them. We don't weigh them as often as we body score them. Every time we catch them for any reason, we have our hands on them we're always evaluating. You know, we're always saying; boy, this one getting fat or these are in good condition or gee whiz, this one needs to go out on the grass for a while and gain some weight back.

Julie Roy: So how often do you think you would be able to designate a change in their body weight, based either on observation or feeling them or whatever? Is this something you're doing once a week? Are you doing it once a month? How often do you do this evaluation?

Weekly Vet Visit Day

Cindy Harris: Well, I would say that we do it continuously. We have a vet day, every Tuesday.

Julie Roy: Which I think is a great idea.

Cindy Harris: The vet comes out and she spends the entire day with us. There was a time when she said; gee, do you think that you'd have enough procedures to keep me busy one full day a week? Do you think we could make that work? I could cut down on my trip fee and I said; well, I don't know but let's try it and see. So, instead of having her out three or four times a week, she just came on a Tuesday and spends the whole day.

Julie Roy: How many alpacas do you think you had at the time you decided that you could support a vet coming out for a full day?

Cindy Harris: Probably sixty or seventy.

Julie Roy: All right.

Cindy Harris: Pretty soon, it became apparent that we certainly could keep her busy a full day every week. So now, we have her a full day every week and then we see her three or four more times as needed.

Cindy Harris: But we try to get all the routine stuff done on Tuesday, the ultrasounds, pre-breeding exams, pre-purchase exams, teeth trimming, anything that's kind of a routine maintenance and evaluation procedure.

Julie Roy: All right.

Cindy Harris: Sometimes we have a different kind of a thing another day and honestly, there are weeks when we see her every single day. It just depends on the week and the circumstances in the herd. If we have a birthing emergency one morning and the next day you've got one that doesn't look like its feeling very well, so we call the vet out to evaluate. So, you know that sort of thing.

Julie Roy: Do you have a special way of organizing what you need done?

Cindy Harris: When we can organize it, it works great. So, when we have her out on Tuesday, inevitably we need somebody from every pasture. We've got to go out and get three from this one and four from that one and that sort of thing, so we must catch everybody.

Julie Roy: I see, sure.

Cindy Harris: {chuckles} While we're in the pen catching the ones we need, we've got everybody really close by and its easy to look and say, hmm, that doesn't look quite right and put your hand on them and see. So, it's just a constant thing. Both Linda, my ranch manager, and I make a point of laying eyes on everybody on the place everyday because you just don't know.

Julie Roy: Cindy that is such a wonderful benefit that you and Linda offer to anybody who's got their alpacas on your ranch. It's sort of like you are caring for all your agistors' animals as if...

Cindy Harris: Well, as if they're my own.

Julie Roy: Exactly. So, you're able to scan the animals, when they are in their natural state and if something seems not quite right, then you could catch the animal, and check it out.

Cindy Harris: Exactly.

Julie Roy: Then if it needs extra attention, then certainly it gets looked at by the vet. So even though you have 260 alpacas under your care and responsibility, you, and Linda, who is just, one other professional person working with you can maintain the health of your whole herd.

Tips on Observing Behavior – What's Normal and What's Not

Cindy Harris: Well, our knowledge came from spending lots of time observing normal behavior. One of the best things that a new alpaca owner can do is to sit and watch their alpacas. Eventually, you get a feel for what's normal and what's not. They have kind of a rhythm that they have during the day; they eat, they drink they take a roll in the dust, they sleep for a while, they poop, they go over and look back in the feeder. There's a certain level of normal that happens out there in the pasture. So, when something abnormal is happening, it's easier to see when you have a feel for what's normal.

Julie Roy: That's where the consistency of caring for your animals really comes in.

Cindy Harris: Right.

Julie Roy: I liked what you said about their rhythm throughout the day. I know some chew their cud all by themselves and that's perfectly fine for them and others when they are chewing their cud, they're in among the whole herd.

Cindy Harris: Mmhmm.

Julie Roy: I also know that, there's the pattern of the eating and the drinking and the pooping and the resting. It really becomes something that you can observe, early in the morning as you give them the fresh hay and the water and clean up.

Then if you, as a new alpaca owner, are still working, you could go do your daily routine on your own in your professional life and leave them to do their own thing. When you return in the evening then, take some time to observe them as you're cleaning up and doing your nightly routine. Notice if anything seems unusual.

Julie Roy: Lots of alpaca owners start out just like you Cindy, where you had to go to work during the day because that still was your life. Yet, it's possible to start a business with very few animals, maintain your present work schedule and still raise very healthy alpacas.

Cindy Harris: One of the things that I do when I need to see if something's normal. If I walk out and I see something abnormal or something that's alarming, in terms of a behavior. The first thing I do is I look around and I see how many others are doing the same thing.

Julie Roy: Okay.

Cindy Harris: If I see someone lying aside and looking droopy or whatever, then I look around. Is it naptime? Are three or four others out there taking a nap? Or is that one the ONLY one that's doing that odd behavior right then. If it's the only one, then I'm going to go over and check it out. If one of several, then my anxiety goes right down and I can say, okay, well then that's normal for right now.

Julie Roy: Yes, it's very good to compare them against the rest of the herd in order to assess if further investigation is warranted. Okay, is there anything more that you would want to say Cindy, about dry lots verse pastures?

Cindy Harris: I think you could easily raise them either way and not have a problem.

Julie Roy: Okay.

Cindy Harris: I think they enjoy pasture and I'm working toward getting pasture because of that. Because I think, it reduces stress. But on the other hand, if you were to come out here today and look at my alpacas, you would not see anybody stressed. They are all very complacent.

Julie Roy: Exactly.

Cindy Harris: So, its just a matter of making sure that everybody has a space and that's it. You know, I can go out with a bucket of pellets, there might be eight alpacas and eight feeding stations, I can put pellets in all eight of them, and all eight alpacas will go eat out of one. And they will spit at each other and compete and emphasize their dominance...

Julie Roy: They're being natural alpacas.

Cindy Harris: They're being natural alpacas and you know soon, some of them drift away and go to the other feeders and everything settles down and everything's fine. So, they do go and compete on purpose sometimes. It's just you don't want them to be in a position where they must.

Julie Roy: That makes a lot of sense. I know again, from my own experience, I have one female, she was the first one born on our ranch. So, she was given a lot more extra attention by me. Her mom has been one of those who would always run up to my pellet feeding and take a bite out of the top bowl. I stacked them one on top of the other and as I'd put that bowl down on the ground – she'd take a bite. Then I would put the next bowl down on the ground – and she's take a mouthful out of that one. This female goes to every bowl, takes a bite out of each one, and follows me down the row. If I put down six bowls, she takes six bites before she settles on the last one. Now her daughter is doing the very same thing. However, if she shows no interest in the pellets, then I know something is a miss and I'd better check it out.

Cindy Harris: Good way to determine normal behavior.

Julie Roy: What I find interesting is that her daughter is doing the same thing even though she and her mother are not in the same corral or been around each other for over a year. The daughter picked up that habit about the pellets; however, it does not translate to eating hay because she is not the dominant one there.

Cindy Harris: Mmhmm.

Julie Roy: She has grown to be one of my larger females; however, she's not a competitor for the hay. For a while there, it seemed like she was going to try and be dominant, but since her mother wasn't the dominant one with the hay, she hasn't picked up that habit.

Cindy Harris: They are such characters, aren't they?

Julie Roy: They are characters and I didn't know that traits like that could be passed on from, mother to daughter and so forth.

Cindy Harris: Monkey see, monkey do.

Julie Roy: It is an interesting behavioral pattern and when you do spend time with alpaca's you start observing things like that, that make it really a joy to be around them.

Cindy Harris: It definitely does. ...

End...



Julie & her husband Don Roy have been in the alpaca business since 2004. They provide training, education and consulting to alpaca beginners, owners, and breeders so that they become more successful, profitable, and knowledgeable in the alpaca business lifestyle. Check out the website for more details.