



Summer's Here! Time to Shed That Heavy Fleece

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Reporter

LITITZ, Pa. — You may have spent the past month or two packing away your winter clothing, but it's just not that simple for an alpaca.

These South American natives don't shed, which simply means, well, they need to be shorn.

Considering that alpacas are relatively new to America (outside of zoos, the first alpacas were imported to the U.S. in 1984), finding someone with shearing experience might be a tough task. After all, dropping a 150-pound animal on its side and clipping away a year's worth of fleecy coat isn't for the inexperienced.

The fleece is what the animal is bred for, so the shearers must do a careful job of taking off the several pounds of fleece in an evenly-cut swath.

It's a job that needs to be done yearly, and there are few people who are accustomed and capable to tackle that job.

The need for shearers is growing along with alpaca numbers. According to the Alpaca Registry Inc., registry numbers show that Pennsylvania has more than 8,000 alpacas registered; New York, almost 9,000; Ohio, almost 22,000; and Virginia, more than 6,000.

Enter Jay Ward, owner of Light Livestock Equipment in Jay, New York. An alpaca owner himself, Ward has been helping shearers and alpaca owners grow more proficient at shearing by hosting an alpaca shearing school for the past two years.

"A number of years ago, I was a professional shearer, and I had to cut back, so we started the school in order for alpaca owners to learn to do it themselves, and for others to do it professionally in order to fill the void," said Ward.

Students come to the one-day workshop in the Adirondack Mountains to learn from instructor Matt Best, a New Hampshire shearer who shears 3,000 alpacas a year.

"In order to attend the class, they don't need to bring any of their own equipment with them, we supply equipment for them to learn how to shear," says Ward. "Anyone can attend, all they have to do is pay the fee and be willing to try it."

The class, which is conducted the second or third week in April, is capped at 12 students per day.

"We need to keep it small," says Ward. "It's a very hands-on course. We bring in about 26-28 alpacas and over a two-day weekend we shear them."

In fact, "everyone gets to shear their own alpaca in total," Ward explained.

"There are three-person teams, because there are three jobs: shearer, head holder, and the rope/fleece collector. Everyone gets to do each of those three jobs during the day with guidance."

Ward publishes a listing for the seminars at www.lightlivestockequipment.com.

One of his students this year was Nate Good, Windsor. As a 4-H'er, Good took a sheep shearing course 15 years ago, and turned his experience into a sideline business.

"I had sheared sheep through the years and wanted to expand into alpacas," said Good, who shears 1,500 sheep a during the February through June season.

"When we do these courses," said Ward, "one of my goals is to turn out one or two people who will become professional shearers. Nate was one of those. He came with the intent of shearing professionally, so we already had a jump start on our goal.

"As soon as I saw Nate start to shear it was obvious he was going to do well," says Ward. "He has a good hand."

Start Your Shearers

To begin the shearing, alpacas are restrained by tethering front and back feet and laying the animal on a padded surface so they can't injure themselves or the shearer.

When it's finally time to put the blade to the animal, "I start with the blanket, where 'the good stuff' is," said Good. The blanket covers the area over the alpaca's back as if a blanket were draped overtop, between the shoulder and the hip. An alpaca typically yields 2-4 pounds of fiber per blanket. This fleece is the best fiber on the alpaca, in comparison to the the "seconds" on the legs and the neck. The "thirds," from the belly and bottom of the legs, are discarded.

As he begins shearing, Good starts from forearm and moves towards rear of the animal before working the clippers up to the backbone. He then rolls the animal over and does the other side "in nice long strokes," he said. "I try to keep the blanket together and not to have second cuts, since that cuts the fiber in half and it's not a nice uniform length."

Once the blanket is off, Good begins to work on the legs. He does not shear the fiber flush with the legs, but leaves enough fleece for the typical "stovepipe" look found on alpacas. After legs, he shape the tail — again not cutting it flush with the animal — and moves to the front to do the neck and clean up front legs.

Although the same shearers and blades are used to shear both sheep and alpacas, understandably, major differences exist between shearing the animals. In five minutes Good can have a freshly-shorn sheep, but the simple fact that there's more real estate to cover on an alpaca means that he might spend 15-20 minutes longer on an alpaca.

Also, "I can't get as many animals per blade," said Good. "I have to change blades after two or three alpacas, but I can get 50-60 sheep on one blade.

"Alpacas like to roll in the dirt and, unlike sheep, they don't have lanolin, a natural lubricant, so between the dirt and the lack of a lubricant the blades don't stay sharp very long," he said. Good owns his own sharpener, so he takes the blades home and has them sharpened and ready for the next round of shearing.

Another difference is "with shearing a sheep you have the whole weight of the animal between your legs, but it's a little easier shearing an alpaca because the ropes do some of the work by holding the animal down," said Good. "Also with sheep I'm bent over the whole time, but with the alpacas I'm on my knees a lot."

Additionally, "I do need an assistant to help roll the animal and hold the head. Sheep I can do myself."

Fiber Value

Once the fleece is off the animal, it's time to finish getting the fiber cleaned and ready for processing.

"'Skirting' is when, once the fiber is off the animal, it is cleaned to get it ready to go be processed," said Terri Kinka, who operates Golden Glen Alpacas, Lititz, Pa., with her husband

Andy. "Skirting entails picking out as much of the hay and straw that gets in their fiber as you can — ideally you want to do as much of that prior to shearing as possible."

Beside hand-picking the hay and straw out, Kinka bounces the fleece on wire, that is stretched over a wooden frame, helping to sift the debris and loose dirt out, and leaving the fiber cleaned and ready to be processed or sent to a fiber show.

Raw alpaca fiber sells for \$5-\$8 an ounce.

After the fiber is cleaned, Kinka sends it to a fiber mill. "Believe it or not, there are lots of fiber mills around," she said. "You just have to make sure they do alpaca."

At the mill, the fiber can be processed into roving, which is a fluffy version of the fiber that is ready to be spun into yarn. A mill can also process the fiber into yarn. A skein of suri yarn can sell for \$25 and up, depending if any other product, such as wool, was added.

Additionally, alpaca owners can send fleeces to such organizations as the Alpaca Fiber Cooperative of North America (AFCNA), which accepts fleece from its members, processes it and turns the fiber into alpaca garments and products that are for sale. These products are offered to their members at a reduced price.

Part of the reason that alpaca fiber is so prized here in the U.S. is simply because of the rarity of the animals. For comparison, the United States is home to approximately 155,000 registered alpacas, according to the Alpaca Registry, while there are over three million alpacas in Peru, where alpaca fiber production is estimated to be around 4,000 tons per year.

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