



Susan Proctor and Stormy.

Your Neighbor *Llama Mama*



ARTICLE BRIDGET GREY | PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT

Susan Proctor plays llama mama to a herd of seven. Stormy, a nine-year-old “heavy wool” llama weighing about 300 pounds, was her first.

“He came up and laid his chin on my shoulder, and it was all over after that,” she recalls. “It was the first time – and the last time – he ever did that.”

Llamas are intelligent and curious.

“But they’re more like cats than dogs in terms of personality,” Proctor says. “They’re a bit aloof, curious and everything has to be their idea. That’s important when an animal weighs 300 pounds. A cat you can pick up, but with a llama, that’s not going to happen!” Llamas won’t bite – they have only lower teeth and a rigid upper palette – but they do spit. That’s usually reserved for other herd members rather than humans, and it’s usually about “food fights and personal space.”

Susan originally became curious about whether llamas would make good lawn mowers for the four-plus acres she owns in Missouri Heights. The answer is yes and no. Llamas come from high desert in the Andes, and they do well in the Roaring Fork Valley. They are two-toed camelids, related to alpacas, vicunas and guanacos. Their woolly coats enable them to stay outside during winter and they can eat our native grasses, but their digestive systems are so efficient that they will get portly if allowed to graze too long. Thus, their mowing must be monitored.

Stormy and his herd actually prefer to be outside. A three-sided shed protects them from summer heat and rain – and like cats, they don’t like water. The llamas must be shorn at least once a year to keep them from overheating. Proctor took her shears to Stormy on Mother’s Day last year, only to be fooled by a late storm.

“It got down to about 20 and he was freezing,” she says. “I got him a purple tie-dye blanket, a foal blanket, because a horse blanket would have been too big. He loved it. You could tell.”

Proctor learned about llamas through Linda Hayes of Glenwood Springs, who is known as “Llama Linda.” Hayes is a certified judge in the Alpaca and Llama Show Association and she runs a llama rescue operation. Prices for llamas advertised on the internet range from \$40,000 for show animals to around \$300 for a pet. Recently, due to the poor economy, rising hay prices and aging owners, an increasing number have been surrendered or abandoned. (One rescued llama, Emma, now guards sheep at the Strang Ranch in Missouri Heights.)

All of Proctor’s llamas are registered, and at Hayes’ urging, Susan began to show them.

“When Luna was born, she had such presence. Presence is a quality that you can’t train for,” Proctor recalls. “When I started to show them, I started to learn a lot about them, and I also got into fiber. Luna has wonderful fiber. Her shorn fleece placed third at the Grand Nationals and it has been made into a lovely lace shawl.”

Llama competitions categorize animals by age and by fleece type. Llamas can compete in events that rank them based on fiber, on confirmation and on performance in classes similar to dog agility events.

Proctor's llamas, a herd comprised of Stormy, his half-brother Buddy and five females, has filled her workshop with show ribbons, bags of fleece, "roving" which is spun into yarn, and bags of brown and warm gray llama yarn blended with silk or bamboo fiber.

Fleece quality depends not just on the individual animal's characteristics, but also on the llama's age and where on its body the fleece grows. "The prime fiber – it's called the 'blanket' – comes from younger animals," Proctor explains. "The first sheering, the cria coat, is usually the best." (A baby llama is called a cria.)

Stormy has been competing in a performance class for five years now and is ranked as a novice champion.

"You walk in front of the llama and holding the lead; you can't see what he's doing and you just hope he's going to follow you," Proctor says. The event calls for the llama and its handler to go through gates, duck under obstacles and cross bridges, something llamas tend to want to avoid. The border collies have nothing to worry about. It's an agility event for a slow, big animal."

Llamas make good pack animals; their two-toed feet are padded like dogs' feet, rather than hooved like horses, so they don't tear up the trails. "The two boys like to go out," says Susan. "They move at a leisurely pace, but the real reason that we don't get far is the people. Everyone wants to have their picture taken with a llama."



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