

A Surilox Alpacas Information Sheet

Downloaded from www.surilox.com written by Karine Raiz

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 over 10 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.

An understanding of the history of Alpacas and where they came from is as important as an understanding of modern animal husbandry.

Alpacas & where they come from

Alpacas come from the high Andean regions of South America, and in particular, from Peru, Chile and Bolivia. Alpacas tend to live at altitude of around 3000 – 4000 metres. The Andes at these levels are cool, with very cold nights. It can be humid up there, with quite poor pasture. There is plenty of good clean water, and the soils are high in minerals.

Matings and births tend to be in January and February, which are the warm, mild months in the Andes.

Surilox Alpacas is based in the Hunter Valley / Mid North Coast region of NSW & while Australia often has drought; we are not usually quite as badly effected as the rest of Australia.

Yes, the grass is sometimes crunchy, but we have several springs, riverfront and can irrigate, we have access to good hard feed, with a good mate who grows the best lucerne hay.

Lucerne is a pasture native to Peru. It can be eaten green, by alpacas and humans. It can be dried to provide an excellent hard feed. Once cut it re-grows, and can be re-cut 7 or 8 times a season. The first cut is extremely lush and high in nutrient. The nutrient content of lucerne decreases marginally, second or third cut is probably the optimum for alpacas.

Fabulous Fact: Fresh young lucerne is called Alfalfa. It was brought to Australia in the early 1850's.

As the Andes are high in minerals 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.

Pat Coleby is a goat breeder who has become an agricultural consultant to Australian farmers who believes in natural and sympathetic animal husbandry. She has written some really interesting books, with

several sensible treatments described within. Her suggestions include mineral supplements and a first line treatment of Vitamins, especially vitamin C and B.

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. The Andes are home to a fearsome predator: the puma. The puma decimates the camelid herd, especially the newborn by about 10% per year. Another 10 – 20% are lost to birthing problems and post birth health issues.

Alpacas seem to self regulate the birthing process.

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.

On our farm we have 3 groups of alpacas, all kept in separate paddocks. This reflects the way they are found in the wild in Peru, where you'll find breeding herds led by a dominant male, and then herds of bachelor males.

Group 1. are the females and cria.

Group 2. are the adult males & wethers

Group 3. are the weaner boys.

The little boys can't run with the big boys. The big boys beat them up and can kill them.

Alpacas do not have a regular breeding season in Australia. But it is wise to mate the females so that you can determine when the cria will be born.

As alpacas are on demand ovulators, this is easy to do, and in this way we have births in early Spring and early Autumn, when the weather is mild.

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.

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I must say that the best place to gain knowledge about birthing is advice from other alpaca breeders. The late Richard Dixon, was an alpaca breeder and vet, wrote an excellent article about problem births. Thank you Richard. It has been invaluable.

Alpacas are pregnant for around 345 days. We have a directed breeding program, so we know approximately when cria are due. There is always someone on farm when cria are due. However cria can come a few days or even weeks early, or late.

There are 3 stages of birthing in an alpaca: Labour, Impending Birth, Actual Birth.

Signs of Labour and 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'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 isolates herself slightly from the rest of the herd & often sits with her back to everyone else

Early Labour can take a day, but impending birth should continue for not more than 3 hours before you need to keep a close eye on your girl.

Impending Birth

The entire herd can start humming, and congregates around the mum – although this has happened exactly once to a mum herd in 10 years.

Vulva becomes stretched and enlarged – if it is not, you are in trouble – call the vet, or be prepared to perform an episiotomy. With the vet nearly 70 kms away, I've had to do this twice.

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

Mum gets up and then sits often. Mum might also roll. This is the result of pain.

Actual Birth - 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.

Collect the afterbirth and bury it. Don't allow your guardian dogs to eat it. They can get confused between afterbirth and newborns, and soon you'll be losing young that are dropped in the paddock. We've never had this happen but we've heard of it.

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

Mum will make short hums, cria should reply. Mum will also stand over the cria, protecting it.

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... Once standing and it has taken its first few steps 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. The cria will eventually 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 left side of the mouth, or even some glucose at this time will do wonders. We have a commercial bovine colostrum replacer [details below] 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 as a last resort. 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! As much as I would like to say this is the herd being sociable, and it may be, but I am quite sure that this is survival mode in action. The herd comes to recognise the new addition so that they can protect it during the

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long, predator filled night. In any case 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 was 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 retrieved my birthing supplies, and washed my hands really well.

Our birthing kit comprises: plastic bags for the afterbirth, surgical gloves, 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, scissors, scalpel, a cria resuscitation kit, stethoscope, electronic thermometer, sutures, topical anaesthetic. 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. Be very careful, the cria's eyes are delicate, so keep your fingers away from them. If you have to slide your fingers to the back of the jaw, but a grip via the mouth is easiest. 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 are 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 about 5 times in total, which is highly unusual, once with Buffy's full sister. We've managed those births and all cria are well and beautiful.

With another girl, of a more amenable nature, I needed no assistance from anyone to help her. Pucci was obviously in stage 2, and was in difficulty. That cria just couldn't get out, and I was on my own on farm. So I went down to her in the paddock, with my birthing kit. At first she didn't want me too close to her, the cria was not visible, but as the birthing process was getting more and more painful, and the cria needed help, Pucci stopped moving away and allowed me to take a look.

Now for the amazing part of this story... I cleaned my hands and oiled them and then Pucci let me place my hand inside her, to feel for the cria! She was not dilated fully but that cria couldn't wait.

Pucci let me place my hands on the cria. She stood still while I had moved her into a birthing position, a job which took several minutes. Interrupting this process were strong contractions. Once I manoeuvred her head into the real world, Pucci then worked with me. Every time she contracted, she pulled herself forward, while I held the cria, and moved her out, contraction by contraction. The cria was born at last.

Now let me say that was the second and last cria that Pucci will ever have. Not because of birthing problems, but because Pucci is a negligent mother. That cria, just like her older brother, had to be hand reared. Pucci is still in our paddocks, producing gorgeous fleece, and her 2 offspring have produced some of our best fleece. One taking Supreme at New England Fleece Show.

Problem Birth No. 2 - Another Maiden Birth

It had been a normal day. We had a couple of births due in the next few days. There had been no sign of impending births.

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Peter fed the girls while I was inside preparing dinner. When he came in he told me that he could see the shape of a cria head at the rear end of a girl who was due to give birth.

OH NO! The sun was setting and the girls were settled into their new shelter, which had no electricity, therefore no lights. I went into emergency mode and then Peter understood, this could be a real emergency.

We grabbed the kit, the phone and ran into the paddock. The girl was standing there, and when I walked around to inspect her rear, there it was, the shape of the cria's head. The female was not dilated at all, and at the opening of her vulva, internal to the girl I could see something brown. I put my clean fingers in to have a feel and OH NO – a nose.

We called the vet, and he was wonderful. But the news was not good and very frightening.

He said "You don't have any time. Get out the scalpel, you'll have to cut the vulva to allow the cria out."

I was really upset, and I said that we'd wait until he arrived. His reply was that we didn't have that much time. He was an hour away, in the middle of surgery and the cria would be dead in 10 minutes.

He stayed on the phone and we followed the instructions. We didn't use anaesthetic. First we don't have it and second the vet said that the female was in so much pain that she wouldn't feel anything, anyway. I performed the episiotomy as instructed, and we delivered a healthy female 3 minutes later.

Between Peter and myself we stitched the female up: One operating, one holding the torch. We gave her a dose of antibiotic as instructed and emailed photos of the finished op to the vet.

Mum and bub fine. Both have delivered healthy offspring since.

If this ever happens to you – call the vet. This was difficult and uncomfortable. Hopefully your vet is closer to you than ours is. For us this problem was totally unexpected but we were prepared. As they say on TV – don't try this at home, but if you do make sure your birthing kit has everything you might need in an emergency see below. Oh and moving a car into the paddock and using those lights would have been a great idea too!

Problem Birth No 3. the dysmature alpaca

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 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 less than 3 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. And milking an alpaca is not as easy as it sounds. Imagine milking a mouse... So Peter gave the little girl a few mls 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 had 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, and the cria must drink colostrum. An alpaca doesn't produce colostrum for long, and after around 12 hours or so, the colostrum starts to be replaced by normal milk. By 36 hours the mum is supplying normal milk, no colostrum.

Colostrum supplies antibodies and enzymes that turn the newborns system from one that receives all its nutrient via the umbilicus, to one that metabolises milk and then grasses into the nutrient it requires. Later once the cria is standing, you'll see the mum licking the cria on the nose or mouth. What the mum is doing is transferring saliva with its enzyme to the cria to start its digestive process.

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 we use for a cria is called a flutter teat. It is available from a few places online. 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 drink water bottle – we use a 300 ml mineral water bottle as it is a convenient size, and has indents that mark every 100 mls.

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 forefinger 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

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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. By the time she was 6 weeks old she was still smaller than a normal newborn cria, but would run up to us for her bottle, every time we called her.

Why was she born dysmature? Well we didn't realise it but her mum had an abscess in her jaw, and effectively was not able to chew well enough to eat as much as she needed to. We were unable to see that her body score had dropped dramatically, as she was a huacaya and in full fleece, and being the sister of case study no.1 she also was not amenable to being touched on a regular basis. Unfortunately the mum died when Corazon was a few days old.

What did we do?

Bovine or Alpaca Colostrum replacer every 2 hours for 3 days – we use Impact. After 36 hours to 3 days the cria's gut can no longer metabolise colostrum.

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. We have also used cows milk with yoghurt, with great success.

The bottles & teats used were cleaned after every feed, just as if Corazon were a human baby, because after all she had as little to no 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 digital thermometer too! We also have vitamins ADE, VAM [vitamins & minerals], some antibiotics, and analgesics appropriate to alpacas
- 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 the side of 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]. If you have a dairy close by, ask the dairy if they have any colostrum, after all fresh is best!

- Read lots, talk to the vet, do courses, talk to other alpaca breeders, subscribe to alpaca chat-rooms, join an alpaca association

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.

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, enjoy 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 grew up gambolling with the other cria. She grew up smart and often stole milk from her playmates mums. She would steal milk and then run to us, humming and chuckling [that lovely clicking noise that mums & bubs make to each other], and we would hum and chuckle back, then give her the next bottle.

She is a very small adult, and while we won't breed from her, she does produce lovely fleece.