

Llamas On the Trail

By Carrie Jenkinson

In the summer of 2005, the US Forest Service in the Columbine District had their personnel start using llamas to pack their gear and supplies into the Weminuche Wilderness area near Durango, Colorado. There have always been a limited number of llama packers in the wilderness, but now we are seeing them every trip. Ron-D-View Outfitters has owned a permit into the Weminuche since 1985 doing overnight trips and five day trips over the Continental Divide every summer. We also do wagon trips into Canyon De Chelly in Arizona and Monument Valley in Utah on the Navajo Reservation. All these trips and still the hair on my neck stands up when I have to call out, "Llamas! Llamas on the trail!"

There is nothing that would put fear into my heart more than hearing those words and having six or seven novice riders in a line behind me. As anyone with horses knows, llamas will cause bucks, bolts and runaways. This is just unacceptable when the ones being bucked and bolted are inexperienced riders. I always start my rides with a short lesson on emergency stops, but when the chips are down it's hard to remember my advice. I decided to teach my dude string that llamas weren't going to eat them and that passing by a string of pack llamas is an ok thing to do. People have laughed at all the stuff I do with the horses and mules we have. I try to get them used to anything that could happen on the trail. Blowing plastic bags, people losing hats on a

windy day and cameras making weird horse eating noises all can cause a wreck if your animals are not used to it. While no animal is 100% bomb proof, I try to get them close to it.

My friend Ron-D-View surprised me one day. He told me that he had to haul some stuff for an old buddy and he'd be back around noon. I said I'd stay home and do some things that I had been putting off for a long time. Fun stuff like doing the laundry! True to his word he was back about 12:30. Since he hadn't taken time to have breakfast I fixed the two of us some lunch. I got busy and was doing some other things when he asked if I would help him at the barn. Anyone who knows me knows that I would MUCH rather clean the barn than the bathroom! So off we went.

Strange, as I got closer to where the horse trailers were parked, I saw that there was something in one. But I couldn't tell what it was. Trying to look between the rails of the stock trailer, I saw a black and white something. I gently punched Ron-D-View on the arm and was about to chastise him for bringing back another mule when I saw the llama stand up. Talk about being surprised! My first reaction (after hugging Ron) was, "My, oh my! Isn't he cute?" The llama I mean! I got him out of the trailer and was scratching his ears when he put his head on my chest and made that little humming sound that llamas make. It was love! For me anyway! I had to think of a name for him. He looked so wise and regal that I decided that I would call him the Dali Llama. But



that wouldn't be right, so out of respect for his Holiness I named him Donny Llama. He continued his humming, so I thought he liked it.

Now all I had to do was get our horses and mules used to him. The whole point of getting him was to keep people from getting hurt. More and more people are using llamas as pack animals. I have been told that you can pack up to 70 lbs. on one. They don't eat as much as a horse or mule and they are easier on the trails. We have started running into hikers using them more the last couple of years. Personally, I don't hike anywhere. If I can't ride my mule I don't need to go!

I started off by bringing about five horses and mules into the corral. Then I slowly led Donny up to the fence. He was curious about those weird looking animals while the equines were trying to hide behind each other! I led him up and down the fence on one side while the horses and mules where pressed up against the opposite fence. Finally, I thought to myself: This is going to take a long time to get everyone used to each other. So I decided to put Donny in a pen attached to the corral the horses and mules were in and put the evening hay on the dividing fence line. Donny dug into the pile that was on his side of the fence while the horses were trying to decide who would be the first to prove how brave (or hungry) they were. Finally, one of the older mares inched up and snatched a mouthful of hay and backed off. Within five minutes she was standing there filling her belly while the others watched. Within ten minutes another mule decided that if the horse thought it was all right then by golly she'd get something to eat too! After about 30 minutes the whole bunch was standing there more concerned with establishing the pecking order than the llama - which is not to say that if Donny

moved a little bit they didn't all jump back! It was pretty interesting watching to see which of the horses and mules were braver than the others. Some stood off a way and would try to sneak in for a bite, while others didn't seem to care at all.



Twice a day I would feed on the fence line. After the second day everyone was ignoring poor Donny who was trying to be friends by sticking his head through the fence and eating hay on the other side. After a week I brought in another bunch of horses and mules and went through the whole thing again. It took about a month to go through our entire string of pack stock and riding animals. Now I will bring in the ones we will be using on the trail for a "refresher" a couple of days ahead of any trips we take. So far (knock on wood) we haven't had any problems. This makes me a whole lot happier.

As a joke we advertised llama stud fees in our draft horse and mule club newsletter. When people found out that we had a llama, they just scratched their heads and wondered if we had gone off the deep end. Fancy a cowboy outfitter with a llama! Funny thing is I've gotten so I really enjoy my llama. I like going out and

scratching his head and listening to him hum. He likes to act all wild when I try to put his halter on and has me chase him around the pen a couple of times. Then he stands to have his halter put on, ducking his head into it.

So, I've learned this is just Donnie's way of having a little fun. When I scratch his neck he puts his head on my chest and kind of leans into me. I'm learning all I can about them. Donny started out as yet another training aid, but has turned out to be a nice addition to our ranch. My goal this summer is to pack him and lead him off of my mule. I think it will be ok.

If you would like to have more information about training your horses and mules to a llama, or information on our wagon and pack trips, please contact us.

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