



Alpaca

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Camelidae
Genus: *Vicugna*
Species: *pacos*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** There are no known wild alpacas. The alpaca is a domesticated farm animal grown for its fleece. They originally came from the Andes Mountains of South America, specifically Peru, northern Bolivia, Ecuador, and northern Chile. They are usually found at an altitude of 11,500-16,000 feet above sea level. Alpacas were first imported to the United States in 1984.
- **Exhibit Location:** Domestic Animal Barn

Characteristics

- Height: 36 inches at the withers (highest part of the back); Weight: 150-200 pounds
- Alpacas have soft, padded feet with 2 toes.
- They do not have horns, hooves or claws, incisors, or upper teeth.
- Alpacas have a 3-chambered stomach; eat grass and chew their cud.
- There are 2 kinds of alpacas: Huacaya (pronounced wah-KI-ya) and Suri (pronounced surrey).
- Huacaya are the most popular at about 90% and the Suri at 10%.
- Huacaya fiber is short, dense, crimped and gives a woolly appearance.
- Suri fiber is silky and resembles pencil-like locks.
- Alpacas are adaptable to any climate.
- Their fleece is similar to cashmere and is warmer, lighter, and stronger than sheep's wool. It comes in more colors than any other fiber-producing animal (22 basic colors).
- Alpacas are often confused with llamas. However, they are about half the size of a llama. Llamas are pack animals, whereas an alpaca can only carry a lightweight load and are instead raised solely for their fiber.
- Alpacas and llamas can be crossbred. Offspring are known solely as huarizo; known for unique fleece and very gentle temperament.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** not found in the wild; **In Captivity** 20 years

Behaviors

- Alpacas are known as gentle animals. They are alert, intelligent, curious, and predictable.
- They are social animals that seek companionship.
- Herds usually have an alpha male.
- Alpacas communicate by soft humming. Hums are often comfort noises, letting the other alpacas know they are present and content. The humming can take on many inflections and meanings.
- To signal friendly or submissive behavior, alpacas “cluck,” or “click” a sound possibly made by suction on the soft palate or possibly in the nasal cavity.
- They also communicate with neck posturing, ear and tail positioning, and head tilting.
- When males fight, they scream a warbling, bird-like cry, presumably intended to terrify the opponent.

- Alpacas warn the herd about intruders by making sharp, noisy inhalations that sound like a high-pitched bray or shrieking whine. Some breeds are known to make a “wark” noise when excited. Strange dogs or cats can trigger this reaction.
- The herd may attack smaller predators with their front feet, and can spit and kick.
- Alpacas deposit their bean-like pellets (feces) in concentrated areas.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** maple branches, vines

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity for females is reached between 1-2 years and for males between 1-3 years.
- Gestation is 11.5 months.
- The female alpaca normally gives birth, without assistance, in the daylight hours.
- Alpacas have single births. Twins are extremely rare. Most recent figures note 1 in 2000 births is a twin.
- Baby alpacas are called cria and are 15-19 pounds at birth.
- Weaned crias are called weanlings or tis.
- Adult males are often referred to as machos; females are hembras.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** not found in the wild
- **At the Zoo:** grain, hay

Conservation Status

- Not found in the wild.
- Predators: coyotes, domesticated dogs, cougars, mountain lions, bears

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Alpacas are related to camels, llamas, guanacos, and vicuna.
- Alpacas were domesticated for their fiber 1000 years before the Egyptians built the pyramids.
- Their coats may grow up to 10 inches a year. They are sheared every 12-18 months.
- Their toenails need to be trimmed every 6 months.
- Alpacas and llamas held a special place in ancient Andean societies. The alpaca, in particular, was seen as a gift from Pachamama. These peoples made clothing from the fiber, fiber from the dung, meals from the meat, and leather from the hides. Further, textiles were a central part of their social system. It should come as no surprise that alpacas assumed a religious significance, or that their form appears in amulets and other religious objects. Conopas (religious object shaped like an alpaca) are an example of this.

Sources:

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