



# FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

## Tackling Toenails with out Tackling your Camelid

*Author, Marty McGee Bennett, www.camelidynamics.com  
Marty is a columnist for most major llama and alpaca publications around the world.  
Her writings have influenced thousands of camelid owners.*

When I teach clinics the topic that tops the list is trimming toenails and picking up feet. It is perhaps the most problematic aspect of camelid management. Understanding why it is so hard for llamas and alpacas to allow a human to handle their feet is a big part of moving through the problem so we will talk about understanding **why** as well as techniques for "**how** to."

I have my own opinion as to why it seems to be such a common difficulty. I agree with the conventional wisdom that postulates that camelids are naturally resistant because of the leg biting behavior males exhibit both between themselves and with females **and** I believe there is more to it. It only makes sense to focus on what we can change and we can't change a camelid's natural behavior. I wouldn't change the nature of llamas and alpacas even if I could. All that leg biting and neck wrestling is part of what makes them so entertaining. So what can we change? We can systematically and logically show a camelid that it is safe for us to handle their legs and then... make sure that it is! Unfortunately many owners decide that toenails will be done come hell or high water and tie or restrain the animal. We then proceed to take a process that could be painless and create a nightmare out of it. From the animal's point of view we now have created a hardened opinion that humans and toenails are a dangerous combination based in **fact**, rather than a sort of nebulous unfounded fear of handling that is far easier to deal with.

Rather than organize this information linearly I am going to offer it up as a sampling of techniques and ideas. Unlike many trainers I find teaching is best approached creatively as opposed to a 1-2-3 approach. In that spirit, pick and choose some of these techniques and give them a try. Having said that— remember the most important thing – "IF WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS NOT WORKING DON'T KEEP DOING IT!" Change something! IF THE HORSE IS DEAD... GET OFF! Mindless repetition and a loyal attachment to an idea that is not working will cause you to teach your llama or alpaca all kinds of escape and evasion techniques that will haunt you. Not all llamas and alpacas respond positively to the same technique, particularly when it comes to toenails. Try new things or new twists on old techniques. If what you are trying isn't working the way that you want it to in one or two tries begin thinking about what you can do differently. Practice makes **permanent**. You don't want to practice what is not working or... you will teach (both yourself and your animal) what you don't want to learn.

•BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–

BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–

BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE–BALANCE..... I cannot say this too many times. The major reason llamas and alpacas struggle about having humans pick up their feet is that humans do not pay attention to the animal's balance. We pick the foot up and take it way to the side, too far back, too high up or we push the animal out of balance as we pick the foot up. In doing this we cause the animal to feel as if he is going to fall. He struggles to regain his balance... and wants his "standing up" equipment back. If we won't give it to him, what is a poor llama or alpaca to do? Falling down is never safe and will cause the animal to begin using techniques of his own to prevent you from getting your hands on his leg in the first place. I have seen many a camelid that could wrap one leg all the way round the other and tuck it handily up under the opposite armpit. Of course kicking is another perfectly fair response to perceived danger. Covering up the legs altogether is another thing we teach llamas and alpacas to do in the process of trying to get a hold of those legs. Of course you can be your own spin-doctor and just tell yourself you were really teaching your lama to kush! Unfortunately your animal will use this new skill all the time whether it suits you or not.



## FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS



Contrast these two photos. In one case the alpaca is leaning on the handler dependant on the handler for balance. This is harder and more tiring for the handler and more frightening for the animal. In the photo on the right the alpaca is standing in balance is more comfortable with the process of having his toenails trimmed.

Pay attention to balance begin to really look at your animal student while you are training him. How is he standing? Are all four legs in a balanced configuration? Legs crossed, a leaning lama, all four legs placed out from under the body, legs that are tucked up all in a bunch under the body are all ways of standing out of balance. Take the time to re-balance your animal before you continue with whatever technique you are using. Camelid body language gives you valuable information about when and how to proceed with training. Overlook balance and you are missing 50% of the picture. When you pick a foot up think of yourself as the gymnastics spotter. You are going to move the leg in such a way that you help the animal find and keep his balance and above all if your critter loses his balance and— you miss the opportunity to help— let him have his foot back and begin again. The old saw "hold on until the animal stops struggling" is perhaps the least helpful piece of advice I have heard.

It is easier to keep a llama or alpaca in balance as you pick the foot up if you pick it up above the knee joint in the front and above the hock in the back. With your hands closer to the body you have less effect on the balance than when your hands are on the foot. You are lifting closer to the center of mass and have less leverage- the same reason you have less power using a short board versus a long board as a lever to lift a rock. Sometimes I use techniques designed to give me more leverage and physical advantage as in leading and haltering, in the case of picking up legs, I want less leverage. Picking the legs up closer to the body helps accomplish this. Try picking a front foot up above the knee while standing in front of the shoulder facing the rear. Think of shaking hands with your camelid above the knee. To begin slide your hand down the shoulder, down the foreleg and stop just above the knee and apply forward intermittent pressure on the back side of the leg to ask the animal to pick up the foot. Your hands are not in the right spot to trim but you can teach your animal how easy and safe it is to stand on three legs and allow you to hold his leg up. This goes a long way toward successful toenail trimming.





## FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

Use the same technique for the rear legs. Lift the rear leg by using the hand closest to the lama to ask him to shift his weight to the leg you are not picking up and the remaining hand to pick up the leg from above the hock. Your hand in on the front aspect of the leg giving intermittent signal to the rear asking the animal to shift his weight and yield the leg.



- No matter how you pick up the foot– front or back THINK support the foot/leg NOT hold/death grip the foot. Squeezing hurts and scares the animal and will cause or contribute to resistance. Ironically gripping is more likely to result in the animal pulling his foot out of your hand–lose-lose. Relax, breathe and go with the movement of the leg or foot. Sometimes jiggling the foot or leg will help the animal move out of instinctive resistance and come back to a thinking place and realize he is in no danger.

- Walk your camelid onto a piece of plywood inside a confined area i.e. catch pen, stanchion, or mini catch pen. Make sure that whatever surface you use it provides good footing- not too slick or springy– make sure the plywood is stout enough to feel safe and secure. If you have help, have your helper keep the animal on the plywood and offer a plate of grain or juicy hay. If you don't have help you will have to work inside something that will prevent your animal from walking away or turning around. If you choose to tie your llama or alpaca it is best to use an area that is smaller than the length of the rope. In other words the area contains the animal not the rope. The rope, in this case, only prevents the animal from turning around. Use pruning type toenail nippers and trim the toenails without picking up the feet or touching the legs. Stroke the nail a couple of times with the nippers to prepare the animal for the trimming sensation and then begin to cut off whatever part of the nail should come off. There are several ways to accomplish this. For many alpacas you can stand up and reach down with the nippers and trim. For larger animals you may find it easier to squat down on the outside of the pen and reach through to trim the nails.



I am amazed at how well this works I have used this technique on many llamas or alpacas who were known for being very difficult to trim including kickers and it has worked to one degree or another every time. Camelids are remarkably unconcerned about the trimming it is the handling of the leg that seems to be so frightening. This technique is particular useful on very long nails and you can do a very good job of getting the nail right back in shape. I was surprised to find that I could manipulate the nail all I wanted with both the nippers and my fingers as long as I restricted the contact to the nail alone and not the leg or the foot. Try this technique you will be amazed. I begin on the front nails and squat



## FLOWERDALE ESTATE ALPACAS

down forward of the leg I am working on. Even llamas that are very skittish and dancey about leg stroking and handling don't mind this technique. I believe this technique is so effective because it totally skirts the issue of humans learning about balance.

- Trim nails after a rain or keep trimm-ees confined in a moist area for an hour or so before you trim.
- Always provide a food source for incentive and distraction during the trimming process. Can you imagine sitting under the dryer at the beauty shop or hanging out at the doctor's office without magazines?
- A llama or alpaca is not a collection of parts but a whole being. You can't successfully create a good trusting relationship with your camelid's legs if you do not pay attention to all the other parts of the body and the MIND. The way that you catch, halter and relate to your animal will impact his willingness to work with you on the leg thing. Using a catch pen and resisting the urge to corner and grab your camelids will do more to create a sense of safety and ease your efforts to pick up legs than any other single thing you can do.



*Marty McGee Bennett – Author, columnist, trainer  
Article reprinted with permission of Marty McGee Bennett, [www.camelidynamics.com](http://www.camelidynamics.com)*