

Llamas are Herd Animals

I turned the llamas, Larry, Pauly, and Buckaroo, two goats, and nine sheep into the upper pasture, closed the gate to the lower pasture behind them, and walked up toward the chicken pen and the greenhouse to do my daily chores there. Everything proceeded according to schedule, and that's the way I like it. I like adventures, but when I'm taking care of other people's places and animals, I prefer predictable routine to unpredictable adventures.

As if I'd precipitated it by thinking about it, that's when the adventure started. The last person through had not fastened the gate from the upper pasture into the house yard correctly. Curious investigators of anything new that they are, the llamas quickly found the incompletely fastened gate, opened it, and came through into the yard, followed by the goats and two of the sheep. The rest of the animals would have come through, but I ran to the gate with all the speed I could muster and shut it in the middle of the herd.

The animals who had freed themselves trotted out of the house yard and began eating the grass available on most of the rest of the place.

Chip, owner of the place, said the animals escaped several weeks ago and ran down the long gravel driveway to the highway. They were frightened by the traffic there and retreated to home ground.

The llamas, leaders of the herd, are intelligent animals. I think they will remember that experience and avoid the highway. I think too, that the fact that part of the herd is still in the pasture will keep the escaped animals from going far. They are all herd animals and are used to staying together.

The trouble is, I'm not sure of anything except that the animals would be more secure, and I would be more relaxed, if they were in the pasture where they're supposed to be. The fence north of the house yard is in poor repair, and there are several places where the animals could get through. I don't want them out in the wide, wide world, seeking adventure. I particularly don't want them on the highway, where they could get hit by a car.

The animals who are out of their normal pasture keep eating grass, and I keep them bunched up near the upper pasture, but they won't all head back toward the pasture where I want them to be. I am too few to herd them all. I hope they will stay where they are, and I run to the house and phone everyone who might be able to help. Nobody answers their phones. I leave messages.

I go back outside, and the animals have moved, still grouped together. They eat grass next to the driveway, but they have moved too close to the highway. I herd them back up toward the upper pasture, but I still can't herd them through the gate into the pasture. They scatter in preference to going through the gate. I can't open and close the gate as needed and still be at the rear of the small herd to encourage them to stay together well away from the highway.

Larry and Pauly are normally among my best friends. When they are in the correct pasture, they walk up to me and stand close. Out of the pasture, they are still my friends, but only at a distance. They know about halters and ropes, and they are not willing to chance giving up their freedom and access to the good, ungrazed grass next to the driveway that they prefer to the hay they have been eating.

I can, to some degree, drive the group of animals, as long as there is good grass for them to move away from me toward. In their native lands, llamas thrive on grass that has dried out for fall and winter.

Of all the ungulates, Larry is proudest of his heritage. I know from previous experience that he won't be tempted if I offer him grain in an attempt to get him to follow me. All the other animals like it quite well and will eagerly follow anyone with a pan of grain. I can't leave the group to scatter while I lead some of them through the gate.

Yesterday, Laura said she would be coming out sometime in the afternoon to visit, but she was unspecific about time.

For two hours, I just keep the animals near the upper pasture and away from the north fence and, loosely, in a group. It takes some energetic running on my part, because the animals don't care at all what I want. They just follow their whims and what they consider to be the best grass.

Finally, Laura arrives. She looks for me in the house, and then I hear her calling, and her voice, always a welcome sound, brightens the cloudy afternoon. It may not be easy with two, but at least it is possible, and with one it isn't. I call back, and she comes to me to hear my explanation of what is happening. We

decide what to do.

Laura gets every animal who will follow a pan of grain into the pasture while I open and close the gate as needed and run to keep the rest of the animals who are outside the pasture in a group.

Then there is only Larry still out. He doesn't care that there is a fence between him and the other animals. They are close to him, and that's all he cares about. I call to Laura. "Try to drive all the sheep up away from the fence."

The sheep are wildest. No one gets very close to them. They are easy to drive, and they retreat from Laura's movement toward them in a tightly packed bunch at a gallop.

As I hoped, Pauly would rather be near Larry than near the sheep. He stays near the fence. "Now see if you can drive Pauly down this way. You're his friend. You'll have to do something mildly threatening."

Laura waves her arms. Pauly walks toward me. The other side of the fence, Larry keeps pace with Pauly, toward the gate. I step toward Pauly, and he walks away from the fence. I open the gate several feet. Larry hesitates. The rest of the herd is in the pasture, and he doesn't want to be alone. He walks in. I shut the gate.

All the animals act like, "So, what's unusual about this? Everything's like normal, isn't it?"

I do a little jig and offer a prayer of gratitude. Then I check all the gates to make sure they are secure. They are. I trot off to try to catch up on the rest of the chores while Laura walks up to the house and starts rounding up something for us to eat.