

Monday, 05/08/06

What ARE these things?

Alpacas are adorable investments drawing oohs and ahhs in Leiper's Fork

By KEVIN WALTERS
Staff Writer

LEIPER'S FORK -Watch closely: The alpacas of Leiper's Fork are pronking,

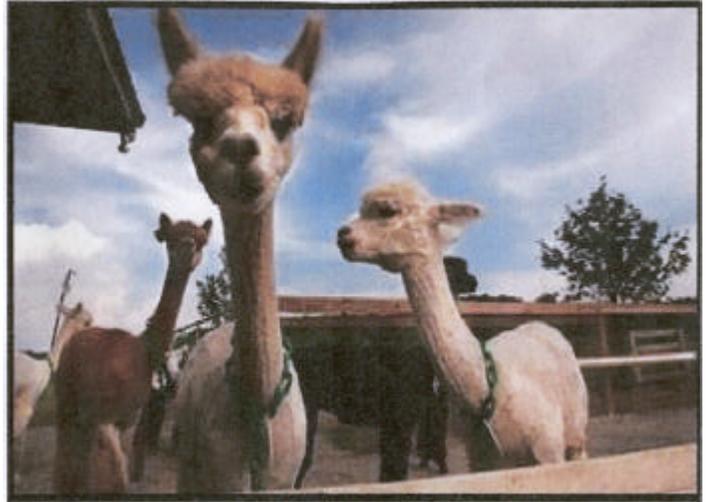
The gentle South American mountain animals owned by Michael and Charlotte Goldston are "pronking" - that's the term for the alpacas' distinctive hop when they're happy and excited. On a recent day at Goldston's farm, he practically has a four-legged chorus line of hopping and humming alpacas bounding around the farm in tawny browns and gunmetal gray. When they're not pronking, they eye visitors with interest. One alpaca named Grace Kelly fixes a visitor with a stare that's equal parts curiosity and disregard. Her eyes, dark and wet as beer bottles, stare out from under a catcher's mask of fleece. Scrubbing her long neck brings to mind 1970s-era shag carpeting -only with a heartbeat underneath.

As much as he fawns over the alpacas, these aren't pets for Goldston, whose day job is as a portfolio manager. For Goldston, just as they are for the breeders of the nation's more than 65,000 registered alpacas, these creatures are business. Interwoven like fibers of their valuable fleece, Goldston's affection for the gentle animals mingles with the reality that his animals represent an increasingly valuable financial investment. "I fell in love with them at first sight," said Goldston, 51. "When I started looking at them from the investment stand point, I fell even more in love."

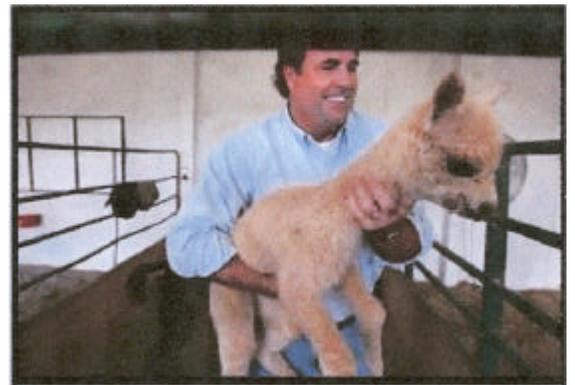
The alpacas nibble on land that Goldston says is currently the largest alpaca farm in the Southeast. He recently moved his herd from Brentwood to the 150-acre farm he named High Meadows just a few minutes from the grits and gravy of the Country Boy Cafe in Leiper's Fork.

He hopes to grow his flock to more than 500 alpacas, increasing his investment all the while adding to the surrounding rural yet upscale fanning lifestyle.

Cute? Certainly. Valuable? Definitely.



Alpacas gather round the feeding area at Highmeadows Farm in Leiper's fork. The herd of about 200 recently moved to the area from Brentwood (PHOTOS BY JEANNE REASONOVER/STAFF)



Highmeadow Farm owner Michael Goldston holds a baby alpaca in a pen with it's mother nearby (PHOTOS BY JEANNE REASONOVER/STAFF)

Goldston's introduction to alpacas was simple enough: They came to him on television back in October 2001. That TV spot sent him scrambling to the Internet to learn more. Goldston says those good looks are matched by low-maintenance care and upkeep, and by value. "I've never had an investment I've had this kind of return on," he said. Alpacas, which are cousins to llamas, have not been imported into the U.S. from South America since 1998. That's made them more valuable, which has raised their prices. Breeders typically pay about \$1,000 for non-breeding males these days, with breeding males selling for as much as \$1 million, according to Goldston and the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association.



Diana St. Onge puts out feed for alpacas at High Meadow Farm.

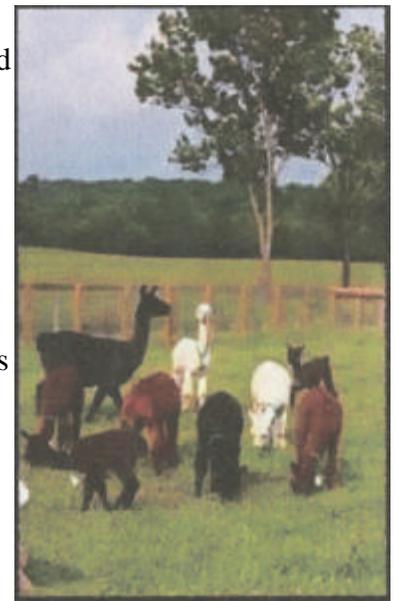
If there's any resistance to getting into the business of alpaca ownership, it may be cost, Goldston says "Candidly, they're just too expensive," Goldston said.

But raising alpacas is not solely a wealthy person's pastime, cautions Cindy Berman, spokeswoman for the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association. She says alpaca shows, which draw owners and breeders from around the country, let people see the variety of backgrounds of those who raise the animals. Interest in alpacas spiked in the wake of Sept. 11 when people began moving out of cities and seeking home careers, Herman added. And the animals don't necessarily have to be raised on a rolling farm like Goldston's. "You can fit 10 alpacas to an acre," Herman said. "You don't have to have a huge farm to raise them."

Alpaca, meet Leiper's Fork. Leiper's Fork, meet alpaca. Goldston's land in Leiper's Fork will one day be home to more than just alpacas.

Michael Goldston and his wife, Charlotte, plan to move here from Brentwood and build a farmhouse on the 150 acre farm within weeks. Charlotte Goldston performs a lot of the veterinarian care. They're excited at the prospect of living here, Goldston said, inviting neighbors to the property for the alpacas' annual shearing, when the fleeces are taken off. He's also had senior citizen groups to meet the alpacas and plans to involve the community more in the future as the size of the alpaca herd increases. Leiper's Fork is apparently happy to have the Goldstons and the alpacas. Aubrey Preston, who is a longtime Leiper's Fork businessman and landowner, is thrilled at the alpacas' arrival because it represents an agricultural use of the land in the face of development. Alpacas gather round the feeding area at High Meadows Farm.

"Because of all the development pressures in the county, real agricultural uses unfortunately seem to be giving way to development," Preston said. That's in addition to the immediate thrill of being around sweet-tempered, interesting-looking animals hopping around pastureland. "You can drive by and sit on the road and see them going through all the different routines and it's exciting for the kids in the neighborhood -and the adult kids," Preston said.



The "mama llama," the larger black animal, watches over the alpaca herd at High Meadow Farm.

Little-llama lingo Here's a handy list of phrases associated with alpacas :

Bugling the warning sound made by alpacas when they see trouble

Cria-a baby alpaca

Clucking -the sound alpaca females make when they talk to their babies

Dam -an alpaca mother; the Spanish word for female alpacas is hembra

Fiber -alpaca hair

Fleece- all the alpaca fiber from one alpaca after it is sheared

Humming -the sound alpacas make when they talk to one another

Herd- a group of alpacas

Huacaya alpaca -a breed of alpaca with fuzzy fiber that grows straight out from the body

Suri alpaca -a breed of alpaca with long, straight fiber that hangs in ringlets down at its sides

Carding -the process of combing and cleaning the alpaca fiber before spinning

Drop spinning -another process used to spin alpaca fiber into yarn

Grazing- alpacas in a pasture eating

Herdsire -the alpaca father who is in charge of the herd; the Spanish word for a male alpaca is macho

Orgle -a noise made by the male when alpacas breed

Pronking -an alpaca will suddenly spring vertically into the air,

demonstrating the astounding four-legged alpaca hop

as "pronking," which is how a happy, healthy cria expresses itself



Alpacas gather round the feeding area at High Meadows Farm.