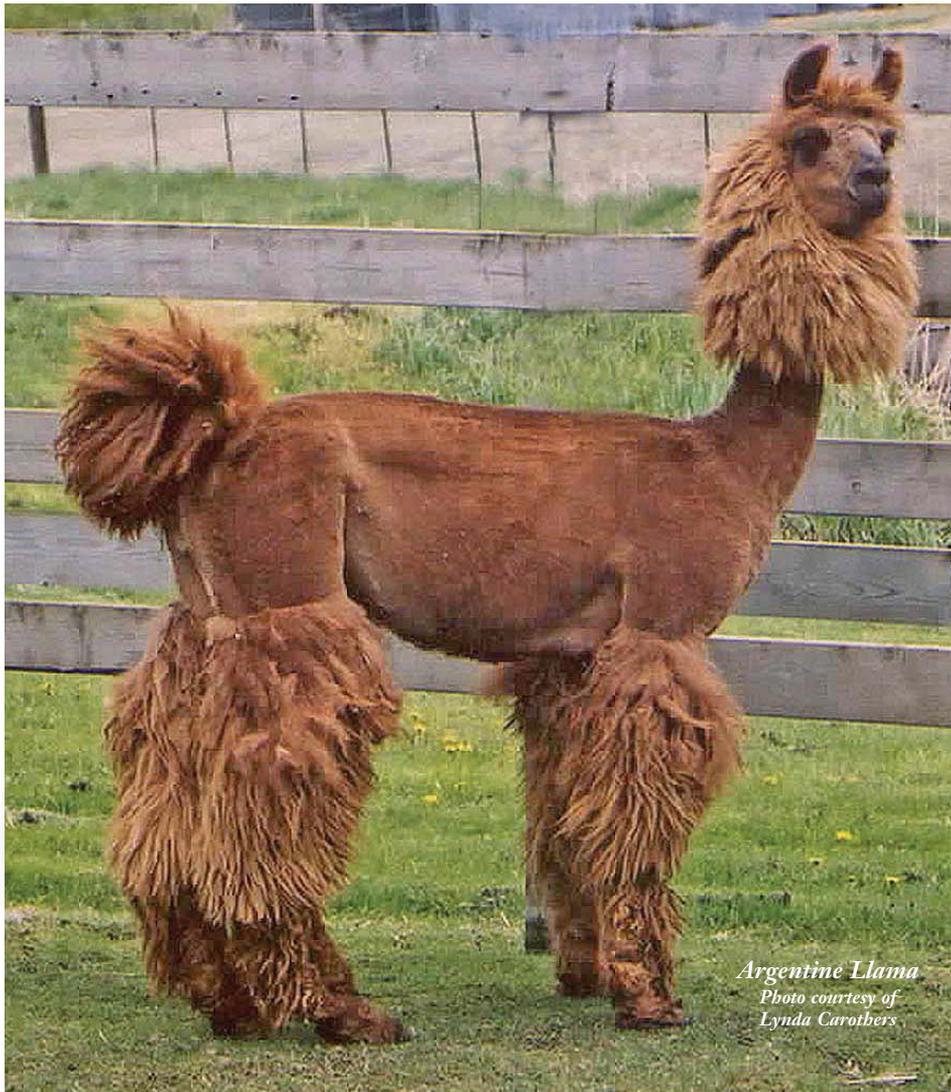


# The Big Makeover

## Llama breed standards and the showring that was

By Daniel Powell

**A** breed standard represents the idealized animal, the very pinnacle of the breed. But while it outlines the phenotype of the idealized animal, its real function is to help define the population to which that animal belongs. It is meant to be the carrot and the stick that helps shape and refine a population for the serious breeder. Breed standards are not meant to be broad and inclusive. Indeed, they are meant to create a gulf between two populations. Not necessarily an impasse where all genetic flow between two populations is halted, but rather a sort of genetic lock and dam system that restricts the flow of genetic material between two populations.



*Argentine Llama  
Photo courtesy of  
Lynda Carothers*

In North America llamas do not yet exist as pure breeds, but exist rather as a loosely defined population, not unlike the mongrel goat and swine herds of the third world. A world where intelligent, constructive breeding systems are seldom employed and where the overall consistency and utilitarian value of

available stock are low. Despite all the money poured into the North American llama industry over the years, this species of livestock still exists as a mere landrace. A mongrel, outcrossed population that is neither purebred nor livestock, neither reliable nor useful. Within this population there have

emerged distinctive types and groups of animals that have each accrued their own cheering section, yet each of these valuable and distinctive subpopulations is pinioned by a show industry that refuses to acknowledge them.

Within the llama industry the 'showring' is often thought to represent the pinnacle in evaluation for llamas. Yet the argentine llama – a population of medium sized llamas noteworthy for their useful fine huacaya fleeces and stocky builds - is relegated to the "heavy wool" class where judges prefer tall, statuesque, silky-fleeced animals. Likewise the ccara – the infamous and ever useful shedding pack llama – must share a ring with light-wooled single coated silkies that have been bumped down from the 'medium wool' class. ALSA has had a love affair with the silky llama since practically before there were silky llamas. Within ALSA's faulty show system Suris, Argentines, Ccaras, and Mini llamas not only take a back seat to the North American Silky Llama but are being changed into silky llamas themselves.

Now, I truly love the North American Silky Llama, but that there is not a 'North American Silky Llama Association' - as there has been associations for suris, argentines, ccaras, and minis – begs the question: Why? I suspect the answer to this lies within the politics and the shortsightedness of the ALSA and ILR showrings as well as in the overwhelming prevalence of the North American Silky Llama. But, to allow a show industry to dilute the distinctiveness of utilitarian breeds like the argentine, the suri, or the ccara llama is a travesty and represents squandering of genetic resources the likes of which we can no longer afford.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, so once again I put forth the notion of developing llama breed standards as one solution for our faltering industry. Llama breeders in North America have enjoyed a surprisingly long run as breeders of exotics and collectibles and, in their long reign, these breeders have not thought to impart true and lasting value or utility to their charges. Blaming the economy for the state of our industry when our industry has failed to produce a viable product is craziness, plain and simple.

Most investors and charlatans have long fled our industry, leaving those of us that remain in charge of cleaning up the mess. Sanctuaries were never the answer – but sound breeding practices and viable end products are. Llamas were originally bred for meat and fiber, and to be used as beasts of burden, and it is to these humble and supremely noble beginnings that we must now return. The evaluation of good stock was the original goal of the showing, and so too the showing must now return to its simpler more noble role.

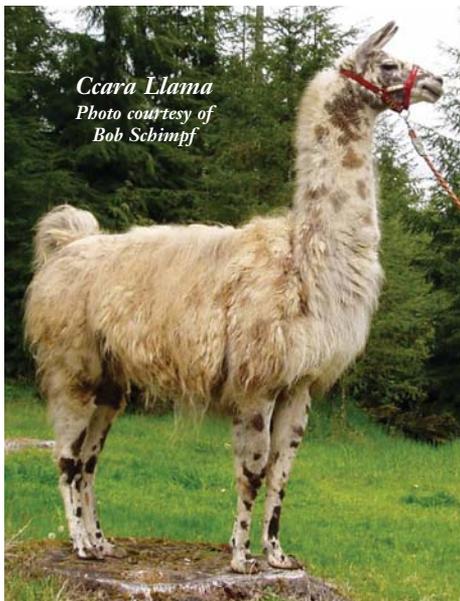
As I see it, there are five distinct groups of llamas which could constitute five distinct llama breeds: the argentine, the ccara, the mini, the North American silky, and the suri. The struggle is in drawing up a breed standard for each which defines the ideal animal therein without overlapping the breed standard of another. To impart value and distinctiveness – and to correct the unhealthy competition between these populations which has been the bane of our industry - each breed must be distinct in multiple ways and special attention must be paid to the utilitarian and recreational niche each inhabits. I put forth the following rudimentary breed descriptions and my rationale for each merely as a primer. And, by the way, not every breed gets to look like a tall, statuesque North American silky llama, as that is what got us into this mess!

### **Argentine Llama**

The Argentine is a robust medium sized llama most notable for its heavy bone and extensive fiber coverage. While this llama has its roots in Argentina, this population does not merely represent yet another ‘country of origin’ marketing strategy. Rather, the trait that most sets it apart from all other llamas is its dense, fine, true huacaya style fleece.

Many breeders are selecting for silky fleeces and large size in this llama, or are merely using an outdated ‘country of origin’ approach to selection while allowing last year’s showing to set their breed standard. By doing so they are undermining the distinctiveness that makes this population special. This is not the North American Silky that has been paraded around show rings for decades. (See photo on previous page)

This is a separate distinctive breed and should be bred as such. They were originally bred for the production of meat and fiber and this should weigh in heavily in the development of a breed standard. I implore breeders to safeguard this treasure and not allow it to disappear into the silky bouillabaisse of the showing.



*Ccara Llama*  
Photo courtesy of  
Bob Schimpf

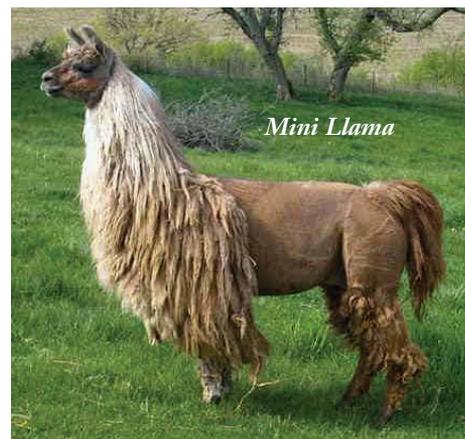
### **Ccara Llama**

These are the tallest and most athletic of any breed. They have a short double fleece that both sheds water and insulates them from the cold. There are many mongrel llamas that are similar in build and well suited to carrying a pack, but what sets this breed apart is that it sheds its fleece every year. This is a very important trait for breeders to consider in their selection parameters.

This breed, in its truest form, is becoming a very rare animal and if ever a breed warranted preservation, it is this one. Breeders of true ccara llamas must pay special attention to temperament as this breed is intended to be highly tractable. Being a beast of burden that has low environmental impact means that the ccara llama fills a very unique and very valuable niche among livestock.

### **Mini Llama**

The mini is, as one might expect, a pint sized llama. Unlike similarly sized alpacas, these are true llamas and have distinctive well-formed llama ears and possess a high tail set. The overall impression is that of a very balanced,



*Mini Llama*

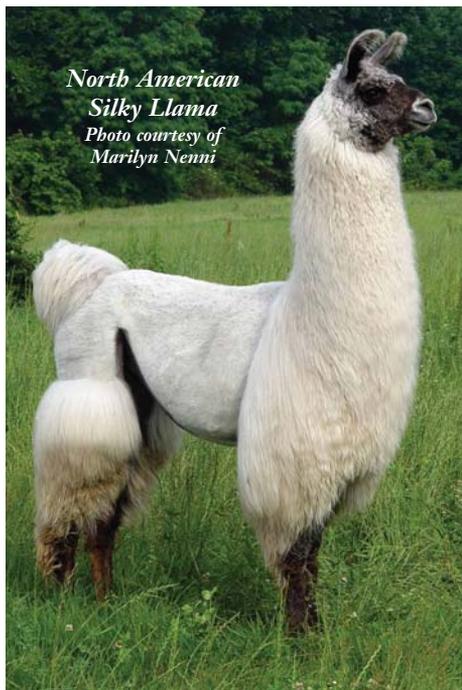
square animal – essentially a miniature North American Silky. These are the ultimate in pet llamas and, while they can be excellent producers of fiber, their amiable natures and kissy-face dispositions is what wins the hearts of their followers.

Breeders of mini llamas should consider selecting minis for silky fleeces to further distinguish it from the similarly sized huacaya and suri alpaca. Likewise, selection for its notably small stature is important to further separate it from the North American Silky. Special consideration should be given to dentition and conformation issues often associated with the miniaturization process. This little guy is not an alpaca. It thinks like a llama and looks like a llama and, like so many of the small farm enterprises springing up around the country, this animal is a great fit for our modern lifestyle.

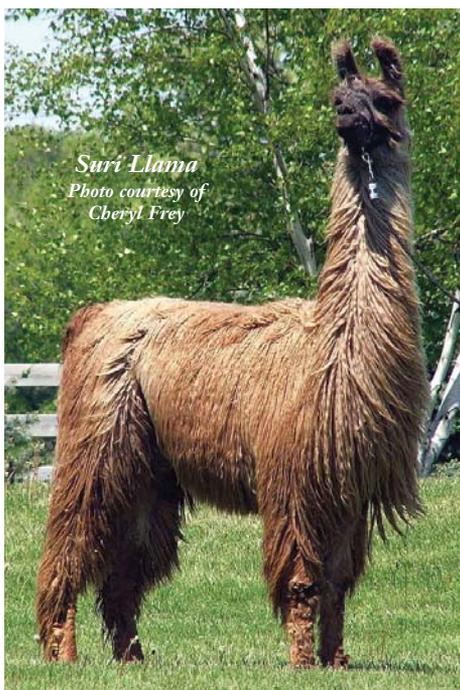
### **North American Silky Llama**

The North American Silky is a tall, elegant, single-fleeced animal seemingly tailor-made for the show industry. Their fleece ranges from straight, with no apparent lock structure, to curly, loose ringlets. In all cases they are single fleeced. The lineage of these beauties can be traced to many countries, but their inspiration, if not their roots, is entirely North American.

This variety is what rose to the top of the llama melting pot, and with good reason. They are stunning. Their movement is magically fluid, they produce beautiful soft fleeces, and are amiable and personable. There has been little conscious selection towards a breed standard with this variety. Rather, breeders have allowed a rather fickle



*North American  
Silky Llama  
Photo courtesy of  
Marilyn Nenni*



*Suri Llama  
Photo courtesy of  
Cheryl Frey*

show industry to dictate the direction the breed would take. Nonetheless, the breed has arrived, and is as worthy of a breed standard as any.

### ***Suri Llama***

The suri is a statuesque llama of medium size and bone and is most notable for its lustrous suri fleece. This llama is often confused with, and lumped together with, the elegant North American Silky. In type, the two are quite similar, although the Silky is generally a taller animal with a fleece that lacks the suris' distinctive pencil thin lock structure. The most distinctive trait of the suri is the extreme luster of its pencil thin locks – well-bred animals look to be 'lit from within.' It is this trait that gives suri fiber its value, and breeders should pay special attention to this in their selection of stock.

Regular interbreeding of this variety

with the silky has resulted in some beautiful 'show suris.' However, this has resulted in low density fleeces that lack the well-defined pencil thin lock structure for which the breed is known. Such indiscriminate crossing of the two varieties undermines the value of each and puts the two into competition with each other. While this breed inhabits a niche similar to that of the North American silky llama, production of quality suri fleeces require very different selection parameters and, as such, this population should be separated out, if it is to truly shine.

It is not by accident or oversight that the above breed descriptions are narrow and exclusionary. Creating very distinctive breed standards works to minimize the competition between the breeds by creating separate markets and niches – as well as separate fan clubs – for each.

It is true that there do exist suri-fleeced mini llamas, silky-fleeced argentine llamas, and argentine-type North American llamas, but the function of a breed standard is to paint a picture of the ideal specimen of each population. It is not intended to be a net cast so wide as to represent the entire population. Not every animal within every breed of livestock conforms to that population's breed standard, yet breed standards foster healthier competition as well as sustainable, long-term breeding practices that impart lasting value to that population and bolster the industries reliant upon them.

I am one of Lama glama's biggest fans. I am awed by the species, by its resilience, by its adaptability, by its history, and by its – I am going to say it – 'magic'. Mine too is a love affair, but not just with the North American Silky Llama. Mine is a love affair with the entire species – an ancient livestock species that deserves a better hand than the one that we North Americans have dealt it.

**CQ**

### ***About the Author***

*Daniel Powell, owner and operator of One Earth Farm, ([www.oneearthfarm.com](http://www.oneearthfarm.com)) has had a passion for animal and plant breeding since the age of eight. While much of his technical training in genetics was obtained while pursuing his Bachelor's in Genetics and Cell Biology, he credits his lifelong hobby and study of breed development and preservation for the bulk of his understanding. Dan has written extensively on the importance of sound breeding practices for the future of the llama industry. His articles have been published in Llama Banner, Llama Life II, Camelid Quarterly, Suri Llama Magazine and the Argentine Llama Aficionados Newsletter.*