

# ELC provides training ground for llamas

by Cathryn Bangs  
Staff Writer

Exotic creatures pad through the Environmental Learning Center pathways, leaving little trace of their passage.

Llamas and their trainers have been using the ELC grounds as a training center to prepare them for real trails, bridges and waterways on wilderness trips sponsored by the ELC.

"Take a Llama to Lunch" is a day hike to Ramona Falls, near Mt. Hood, scheduled for this Sunday, October 15.

Nan Hage, Assistant Director of the ELC, has much good to say about llamas.

"I really like their personalities," says Hage. "They are affectionate, stable, surefooted, and they do not hurt the environment. Their feet leave less marks than a person's footprint."

This is because of the llamas' unique foot, Hage explained. It is soft like a dog's pad on the bottom, and there is a hard cloven hoof forming the top and the toes.

While llamas don't haul people, they do haul food and gear. They can generally pack from 60 to 80 pounds, or one-quarter of their body weight. The llamas used by the ELC weigh from 300 to 400 pounds. Males are used for packing, females for breeding. Both are used for their wool.

Hage said that people come on llama hikes for many reasons.

"For some it is a new and novel way of hiking; others are thinking of buying (llamas). Other people are to the point where they need help carrying gear, either because of back injuries or other handicaps, or they are carrying children in packs."

"Some have noticed their posture has improved after walking with llamas because the llama

stand so tall and straight," says Hage.

Photography and plant identification are a specialty of Hage's, and some teachers and students can take college credit for study on the trips.

Camping without a great environmental impact and teaching others these techniques is another aspect of the trips.

"The program began three years ago, Hage remarked.

"I returned from a marathon backpacking trip where I carried a 45 pound pack. Soon after that I met Jean (Skou, the llama owner) when her husband was doing some excavating for the ELC. She said llamas carried gear for packing, and that sounded pretty good to me."

Since then the program has evolved to day, weekend, and week-long trips, taking up to five llamas to pack gear.

Hage relates a funny story about this summer's trip to Jörn Lake in the North Cascades.

The llamas were tethered on long leads to graze in the meadow.

"While I was under the portable shower, I heard someone or something walking up the trail. I turned to see Thunder the llama peeking at me around the trees."

Hage quickly realized it was up to her to catch the llama, whether she was clothed or not.

"I've never dressed so fast in my life!" Hage laughed.

She donned what clothes she could, and by that time others had come to help. With a bribe of alfalfa pellets, and the llama was captured.

As Hage's story illustrates, packing with llamas can be fun and full of surprises.

Details of Sunday's trip and trips scheduled for next summer are available at the ELC.




The ELC is letting Nan Hage and Jean Skou use their grounds to train llamas. Skou is training the llamas for real trails, bridges, and pathways in the wilderness.



Alyssa is one of the baby llamas on the ELC grounds.



The llamas are used to transport food and gear for hikers.



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