DESERT LIVING

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A group of female llamas gather in a field on the Rattlesnake Ridge Llama Ranch north of Pasco. Gayle and Scott Noga have about 15 of the furry animals, many dubbed with quirky names like Winter Sunshine, Lyon's Melody and Buffy Chestnut.

For the love of llamas

Couple who started with animals for backpacking trips evolve ranch into rescue mission

Above: Scott offers Lyon's Melody a cup full of food during a recent stroll through the pasture. The Nogas enjoy taking some of their llamas on pack trips with friends, during which each llama is loaded with 70 to 80 pounds of gear, clothes and food.

Right: Gayle occasionally weaves the llamas' wool into yarn.

CHRIS MULICK
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Ever curious, 3-year-old Melody creeps in on a conversation, extends her neck and leaves her curiously warm breath on a visitor's unsuspecting hand, nudging his notebook before pulling back.

Not interested.

"Anything new enters the field, they've got to be right in there checking it out," Gayle Noga explains.

That's not at all out of the ordinary at the Rattlesnake Ridge Llama Ranch, found online at www.rattlesnakeridgeranch.com. Visitors can expect an up close inspection from 15 woolly inhabitants who will eat treats right out of your hand, tickling your palm with their supple lips.

Scott, 49, and Gayle Noga, 46, bought the place off Taylor Flats Road north of Pasco six years ago and within months began collecting llamas. They thought they'd try out a couple at first but that notion was dispatched quickly.

"Yeah, like the first week," Gayle said.

The couple, who have three grown children and four grandchildren, got the llamas because Gayle developed exercise-induced asthma that hampered their backpacking trips. Scott at times would end up carrying two packs instead of one.

When they began considering enlisting the help of companions who might carry the load for them, horses were thought to be too expensive and too high maintenance with their prolific pooping leaving hikers constantly watching their step.

By comparison, llamas don't cost as much, are easy to train, eat relatively little and know how to hold it.

The Nogas bought a large van with removable benches for trips. The llamas are comfortable lying in the back.

They've become far more than backpacking companions. Gayle owns and operates Giggles Gluten-Free Bakery in Richland's Uptown Shopping Center and has named her breads and pastries after them. They include Pepper Corn's Spicy Muffins, Asher's Applesauce Maple Bread and Mariah's Double Chocolate Brownies.

Though several of the Noga llamas were born there and some are for sale, the Nogas no longer breed them and have turned the ranch into a rescue mission of sorts. They've taken in abandoned llamas or llamas in poor health and, if possible, try to find homes for them, sometimes charging a fee for their training, veterinary and rehabilitation costs.

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LLAMA | Good at guarding home

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Just one of their 15 llamas was rescued but they soon may get three more.

Llamas, which can live into their 20s, sometimes are abandoned when their owners die. And the females can be impregnated at any time, often times producing unwanted babies.

"There's a fair amount of indiscriminate breeding going on," Scott said.

But the couple won't let just anyone take a llama off their hands. Scott, who works at Energy Northwest, sometimes will do "farm checks" to make sure prospective owners are up to the task.

"We don't want them to have to come back," Gayle said.

Though they can become susceptible to an array of diseases — the Nogas have become well acquainted with the Washington State University vet school — llamas are relatively easy to care for.

They often find their own food grazing. They need their water buckets refreshed regularly, coats sheared every year or two, and toenails clipped as needed.

But they aren't naturally equipped to thrive in warm weather climates. At the Noga ranch llamas keep cool by dipping into an irrigation pond, walking underneath a sprinkler or past a fan blowing cool mist.

Not all the Noga llamas are meant to be packers. Some excel as guards, using their radarlike senses to detect predators and sound an alarm.

Others are good for public relations. Because they only relieve themselves in communal "bean" piles, they're safe to take to schools or nursing homes or wherever their visit might be welcomed.

"They all have their individual personalities," Scott said.

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In the six years since the Nogas have started keeping llamas, they've learned a lot, and they say they're eager to mentor other llama owners. The couple also set aside 2 percent of the profits from Gayle's gluten-free bakery for their llama rescue operation.