The Argentine Type Llama

by Paul Taylor

During the past decade awareness of the existence of a different type of llama, different in several ways from the llamas known to breeders in North America, has been growing. I first saw this type of llama in the herd of a man named Jose Bedano in central Argentina in 1990. I was traveling with a group of friends by road across South America from Buenos Aires on the Atlantic to Santiago, Chile, on the Pacific. We stayed the first night in Rio Cuarto, Argentina, and spent the next day looking at the animals of the Bedano herd near there.

There were more than 100 animals, and included among them were several llamas that were stockier and had heavier bone than we had ever seen in the US. The single trait that we found most unique was what we called “bigfoot.” We noticed that some animals had feet that were almost twice the size of the llamas we were used to seeing, and the feet were covered with bushy wool. Almost all the animals that had this characteristic were reddish in color and had very heavy bone and heavy wool coverage. This package of characteristics was so unusual and interesting that several of my friends went together to buy ten of these animals from Bedano in the hope that they could import them sometime in the future. That importation never happened because of the existence in Argentina of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). FMD is a serious disease of livestock that has not existed in the United States since the 1930s, and USDA has strict bans against importation of susceptible animals, including llamas, from FMD countries.

The introduction to this type of llama turned out to be very important in my own search for great llamas in South America in the years to come. At that time, more than thirteen years ago, their existence was just another interesting fact about llamas that would be filed away for future reference. When we asked Jose Bedano where these animals could be found he offered a vague response about uniform herds of this type in the North of Argentina, but it would be several more years before I could learn about their exact location.

Soon after that experience in Argentina, Sally and I launched the Temuco Project, with the goal of finding and importing the very best llamas available in Chile. Chile was free from FMD and Chilean llamas could be imported, although with some difficulty and considerable expense, directly to the US. During the first few years of that project we and our Chilean partners concentrated our search for great llama genetics in the far North of Chile, along the border with Bolivia. We were successful in this search, and imported a total of 50 or so great llamas that had a very positive impact on the US gene pool, but these were llamas of types that were relatively familiar to North American breeders.

Eventually, and largely because there were so many genetic defects seen in these llama herds in the far North of Chile, we organized an expedition to visit the herds in Chile’s Second Region, about 300 miles to the south of the area we had been searching. Region II of Chile shares a border with Argentina, and here, near the border, we began to encounter some llamas with the same bigfoot syndrome I had seen years before in the herd of Jose Bedano in Argentina. There was more variation in these llamas, interesting color combinations and different wool types, but the heavy bone, heavy wool and big feet were there, and we asked the owners of these herds where this type of animal came from. They pointed eastward, toward Argentina.

Our Temuco Project shifted the search for great llama genetics to the Second Region in Chile, to an area where small herds of unique and interesting llamas of this new type were hidden among the remote hills along the border with Argentina. We called this collection of small herds Rebaño Escondido, which means “hidden herd” in the Spanish language. All the llamas we imported to the US from this area had the registry identifier “Rebaño Escondido in front of their given name or number. Eventually we began to refer to this package of characteristics as “Argentine-type” in our marketing back home. We are still very partial to the Rebaño Escondido animals, and we still have several of them in our small keeper herd today.

Our Chilean partners were not interested to pursue the search for this type of llama into Argentina, so Sally and I made contact with a group of Argentine businessmen who had collected a herd of about 300 llamas for fiber production. These people called themselves and their llama venture Llamichos, and they invited us to see the herd in person. Because these animals had been chosen only for fiber production, many were not very beautiful or interesting to us as breeding stock, but most of them were of the Argentine type. This was the first time we had seen a big group of these animals in one place, and we began to learn more about them and their origins.

The manager of the Llamichos herd, Guillermo Vila Melo, told us that almost all of these animals had come from Catamarca Province of Argentina. He had been involved in their selection and could take us to the herds of origin. He told us that there were no alpacas in Argentina, so the people of the highlands had bred this type of llama for centuries, primarily for fiber production (which explained their heavy coverage with fast-growing fine wool) and for meat (which explained their size and stocky conformation). He said that the red color was dominant in this type of llama, but that there were also black, white and even a few blond and gray animals in this gene pool. Apparently the campesinos in Argentina had selected for solid colors in these llamas, just as alpaca breeders in Chile, Peru and Bolivia have for centuries selected and bred for solid colors. This is because the wool produced by solid color animals is more useful in spinning and weaving than multi-colored wool.

We began immediately to arrange an expedition to Catamarca Province. This trip was to be organized and guided by Vila Melo, and Llamichos would purchase up to 50 llamas selected by us. Beauty and presence would be added to the list of selection criteria to target the US llama market.

We went to the remote areas of Catamarca and Salta Provinces on two different trips in the late ‘90s. Both times the vicuña research station at Laguna Blanca was our base of operations. We found thousands of animals of the type we wanted, and selected about 50 on each of the two visits. Overall, we looked at more than 100 llamas to find each one that met our very strict selection criteria. There were very few genetic defects in these herds, which indicated that good herd management and breeding practices had been exercised here for a long time.

The llamas in the areas where the Argentine type animals were found share the range with vicuñas, and orphaned female vicuñas are sometimes incorporated into the local llama herds. It was not uncommon for us to see one or two obvious llama-vicuña hybrids in a large herd of llamas. This led us to the conclusion that a small percentage of vicuña genes are part of this package we call the Argentine type, which could account for the fine fiber and reddish color that is so dominant. Why vicuña influence would lead to big, robust and heavy-boned llamas is a complete mystery to me, but I believe it is so.

The full story of our last llama expedition in Argentina was printed in Llama Banner, Vol.11, No.6 under the name **“In Search of the Perfect Llama in Argentina”**. This story and related photos are posted on our website at:
http://taylorllamas.com/Stories.html

In all of this long process we selected animals that were well-conformed and correct, with beauty and presence, but instead of choosing only solid colors we tried to get a balance of colors and patterns in this foundation stock.

After both of these expeditions to select llamas for Llamichos, the purchased animals were trucked back to the main Llamichos herd in the central Pampas of Argentina. We hoped to make an exportation from there to the ranch of our Chilean partners in Temuco, Chile. Because Argentina had been free from any new cases of FMD for more than five years, Chilean animal health authorities were receptive to this idea if we agreed to a 90-day pre-embarkation quarantine of the animals inside Argentina and transport of the animals by air from Buenos Aires to Santiago followed by a 60-day high-security quarantine in a special facility near Santiago.

In fact, we made two shipments of llamas from Argentina to Chile, the first legally sanctioned movement of camelids between these two countries in history. In all, about 50 Argentine llamas came to Chile. We

were able to get permission from USDA to import the babies of these Argentine llamas to the US if they were born in Chile, and some of these were the first pure Argentine llamas ever to come to the US.

After a few more years we obtained special permission from USDA to import the remaining adult Argentines from Chile to the US, those who had been born in Argentina. We held an online auction sale from the ranch in Temuco, which resulted in approximately 35 pure Argentine llamas being sold to about 20 US breeders in every part of the country.

Shortly after we got the Llamichos llamas out of Argentina, that country suffered a serious outbreak of FMD, and all further exports to Chile were blocked. The process for USDA to declare a country free from FMD takes at least 5 years, and usually longer, so we don't expect any direct pathway for importation of llamas directly from Argentina to the US for at least several more years.

Now we are beginning to see the babies from crosses of the Argentine type llamas with other types in the US. The results are very impressive. These crosses have never been done before, except in the zone along the northern section of the border between Chile and Argentina. US breeders who have Argentines are very enthusiastic about these animals and about the half-Argentine babies they are producing. The pure Argentine and half-Argentine llamas are getting a reputation in the US for mellow dispositions and high intelligence in addition to their heavy bone and fine fiber production.

Here at our ranch in Bozeman we have kept ten pure Argentine llamas, seven females and 3 males, to use in our embryo transfer program. By transferring early embryos from pure Argentine females (bred to pure Argentine males) to ordinary or even genetically defective recipient females, we are able to get at least three or four pure Argentine babies per year from each donor female. This is still a pitifully small number of pure Argentine llamas added to the US gene pool each year, but we are confident that their influence will be important in the decades to come.