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A Western North Carolina Matriarch of Hummers: Erin Greene

Photos and Text By: Kristalyn Bunyan



Tucked away off Pegg road in Weaverville, lives a community of graceful camelid hummers. Around thirty alpacas frolic and rest on the beautiful Last Penny Alpaca Farms owned by Erin and Brandon Greene.

Erin has worked on farms since she was a child. Although, Erin's mother, Susie Wheelis, dreamed of alpacas, she began her farm in Alexander with Coopworth sheep and Angora goats. When Erin was twenty she worked for six months on a small alpaca farm in Boone in order to learn about these new and strange animals. Erin returned to her mother's farm with essential camelid knowledge and helped her mother with tasks ranging from administering shots,

shearing, and daily halter training.

Grown now, Erin and her family continue to raise and breed Huayaca and Suri alpacas. Erin's son, Jacob, has been exposed to the alpacas since he was first brought home from the hospital. At the age of two, Jacob is tossing out hay, feeding grain, and raking manure piles. One of his favorite chores is cleaning the water buckets. Erin reminisces about the day when her alpacas discovered their new automatic waterers. "Jacob had to go explore them the same way as the alpacas. Soon he had his entire head in the water pail, making this funny slurping sound, just like the 'pacas! He loves to watch the animals eat, he says, "Eat pacas, eat!"



However, the joys of farming are paired with seasonal challenges. Worries of finding hay during drought or dealing with illness frequently confront Erin and her farm. However, she maintains a spirit of adventure, patience, and care; trying to stay prepared before such challenges occur so she can enjoy the beauty and simplicity of the alpacas.

Watching the alpacas frolic, nibble, and fuss over each other offers a certain serenity and peace. As an alpaca breeder, Erin's favorite time of year is when the crias (baby alpacas) are born. Last Penny Farms breeds for either spring or fall crias when the weather is mild. Observing a cria's nativity births a mystical awe and wonder in the observer. Erin loves watching the cria learn how to use its limbs to run around within just a few hours after its birth. The scene of mother and cria on the hillside in evening golden light is truly enchanting.

Besides the joy and entertainment of watching alpacas browse in the fields, these mystical creatures also produce wonderful fiber. Since the fiber grows throughout the year, alpacas must be sheared annually, usually around the start of summer to reduce heat stress. Erin and her husband, Brandon, offer shearing services to those in the region and are quite busy during this time. Erin explains, "Alpaca fiber is a very exquisite fiber, prized for its softness and durability. The finest and most luxurious of alpaca fibers is the cria fiber. Alpacas can produce between two to six pounds of fiber, some more, some less. Fiber quality is broken into three grades, ranging from the blanket to seconds to thirds. These grades allow us to determine what we are going to do with our fiber to make the best-finished product possible."



Many times bulk batches of fiber are processed at fiber mills rather than by hand. Erin and other alpaca farms are excited about the opening of the first regional fiber mill, Echoview Fiber Mill in Weaverville, as it allows the fiber to be processed locally. Until this year, Erin has been using mills outside of North Carolina to process her fleeces. If her fleeces aren't processed into carded fiber or yarn skeins, then oftentimes it's sold as raw fiber to buyers or donated in fiber exchange programs in local fiber coops. Erin hopes the Asheville area and its ever expanding collection of fiber artists will become more aware of the presence of local fibers. "Our vision is to also have a product that we will be able to say is 100% local. By a mill opening up in our area we will be able to have our fleeces processed completely in Western North Carolina, never leaving our zip code!"

Western North Carolina's fiber community has expanded over the years. Erin has noticed an increase in fiber enthusiasts attending the annual Southeastern Animal Fiber Fair which happens in the fall at the WNC Agricultural Center. Also, throughout the year many more tourists and residents are expressing their delight in alpaca fiber at farmers markets and alpaca open houses. Erin also actively participates in several non-profit groups including Hand Made in America and Local Cloth which are both dedicated to growing the fiber economy in Asheville.

Last Penny Farms is a member of Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA), Alpaca Registry Inc. (ARI), Southeastern Alpaca Association (SEAA), New England Alpaca Fiber Pool Inc. (NEAFP), and Alpacas of Western North Carolina. Last Penny Farm produces and sells fiber and related products, including raw fiber, yarn, socks, and scarves, which all can be purchased at Last Penny Farms.

Visit the farm, gaze at the alpaca's mystical beauty, and listen to the gentle hums at Last Penny Farms. If you stay awhile you, may just want to start your own alpaca farm.

Additional information on Erin and Last Penny Farm can be found at lastpennyfarmalpacas.com. Or check out the next alpaca open house at Alpacas of WNC website, www.alpacaswnc.com.

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