

Tick Paralysis in Llamas

By Scott Noga, Rattlesnake Ridge Ranch, Pasco, WA

We had a situation three years ago with one of our pack llamas that picked up five female Rocky Mountain Wood ticks during a week long pack trip in SE Wallowa Wilderness despite having both CyLence pour-on and Ivermectin injectible on board, plus insect repellent spray during the trip. None of this repelled or killed the ticks, though the literature claims both Ivermectin and the pyrethroid-based CyLence will kill ticks. (It requires a very high dosage of Ivermectin.) I spotted and removed two ticks on her coat during the trip that had not attached yet, but she went down the day after our return home. The literature says paralysis occurs typically anywhere from 1 to 10 days after a tick begins feeding, but once removed the recovery is typically far enough along in about 12 hours to where they can support their weight. We identified the problem and once the three remaining ticks were all found and removed she soon recovered. One of our pack companions, who we immediately notified of our situation, had two of their llamas go down and very nearly lost one of them to it. For some time that llama couldn't even hold her head up and was just a limp rag. A characteristic symptom of tick paralysis, whether human or llama, is a progression from bottom to top. The legs go out and they can't stand up. As it progresses they eventually can't even hold their head up. Death, when it occurs, is caused by respiratory arrest. The owner stayed with that llama around the clock (sleeping in the barn) providing supportive care and the llama did fortunately recover.

The challenge is finding the ticks. Ticks usually can't penetrate the dense undercoat without getting all tangled up, so look real close all along the perimeter where the long hair meets the short hair. Two of the three embedded ones our llama had were along that line. The third tick was near the teats. Ticks tend to climb until they find a sheltered spot like an armpit, under the tail, or hit that dense hairline. Also check the head and ears carefully. Shearing may be necessary to aid the search. You may also see tick poops near the tick in the hair after they have been feeding a while. These are collections of little dark granular bits that look a little like coffee grounds or dried blood. If you see those you're near the butt end of the tick. These are much easier to see on a white llama.

Many vets recommend antibiotic treatment as ticks can carry infectious agents and the toxins tend to stress the llamas immune system.

See <http://www.wsunews.wsu.edu/pages/publications.asp?Action=Detail&PublicationID=11136> for an article on tick paralysis.

I took pictures of one of the engorged ticks after removal.

