

AGRIBUSINESS

New wave ranchers flock to alternative livestock

By Luanne Kadlub
news@ncbr.com

You expect to see cows and horses, even chickens or ducks, on most any farm in Northern Colorado.

However, nontraditional farm animals — alpacas, angora goats, miniature donkeys and even pheasants — are becoming almost commonplace on the agricultural landscape.

For those who have dived into owning uncommon livestock or game birds, the reasons are many, but they all seem to have at least one thing in common: A desire for a simpler lifestyle. Some have it made a full-time endeavor, while others see it as a way to supplement their income — someday.

John Heise and Cynthia Fronk are two Type A personalities from Boulder who chose to simplify their lives. They now own Stargazer Ranch east of Loveland, just off Colorado Highway 402, where they keep alpacas.

Heise continues in his real estate career while his wife has thrown herself into the venture with the same zeal as she did when she worked full-time as a regulatory compliance consultant.

"I wanted horses," Fronk said. After researching horses, she and her husband began to realize how expensive a proposition they would be. "When we talked with our accountant about deducting some of

the expenses, he laughed."

Some livestock expenses, however, can be depreciated, including livestock, barns and fencing.

So they began looking for a livestock venture that wouldn't end in slaughter to make a profit. Alpacas fit right into that thinking.

"You can sell them and sell their fiber to make a profit," Heise said. "Cindy's father had raised beef cattle and all the calves became her friends."

The couple researched alpacas for a year before buying their first animals in 1998. The first year they acquired 11 alpacas. They now have 40 alpacas, which individually sell for thousands of dollars, with 12 expecting babies. The animals are shorn once a year and the fiber and spun yarn is sold in their store on the ranch grounds, along with other Colorado-made products.

Both Heise and Fronk say they're surprised with the amount of attention alpacas attract from those simply curious to others interested in raising alpacas, too.

"People are looking for a reason to have a quieter lifestyle," Heise said. "They're moving out to a couple extra acres and want to raise animals."

Where is the industry headed? Unlike the emus and ostriches of a decade ago, Heise said the alpaca market is worldwide and greatly untapped. "There are 50,000 alpacas in the United States, in 20 different

colors. There are six to seven million horses. Alpacas aren't even a blip on the radar."

He added, "If we would have done anything different, it would be to have more faith in the alpaca industry and less faith in the stock market."

For Kathy Martin and her daughter Kelley, angora goats seemed to be the best route to go. Again, the first dream was horses. "In 1986, when I was looking around for horses, I was running out of money and still needed to build a barn for the horses and plan ahead for retirement."

With a longtime interest in handcrafts and needlework, Martin began investigating fiber animals. She narrowed it down to angora goats. The initial cash outlay would be doable — \$100 to \$1,000 per animal — and they could be shorn twice a year. She started with three goats and now has a herd of 23 on their five-acre Wynham Farm east of Fort Lupton.

"We could have kept it at a lower level of time and expense, but we went into it whole hog. We decided to do it the right way and put as much money as we could into the operation. Instead of income, it's become a liability."

Equipment has been a big part of the investment. She invested in the best shearers possible and a shearing stable from New Zealand, which has turned out to be a back saver for her and Kelley and a stress reducer for the goats.

Martin sells goats, but screens the buyer



Kim Lock, Northern Colorado Business Report

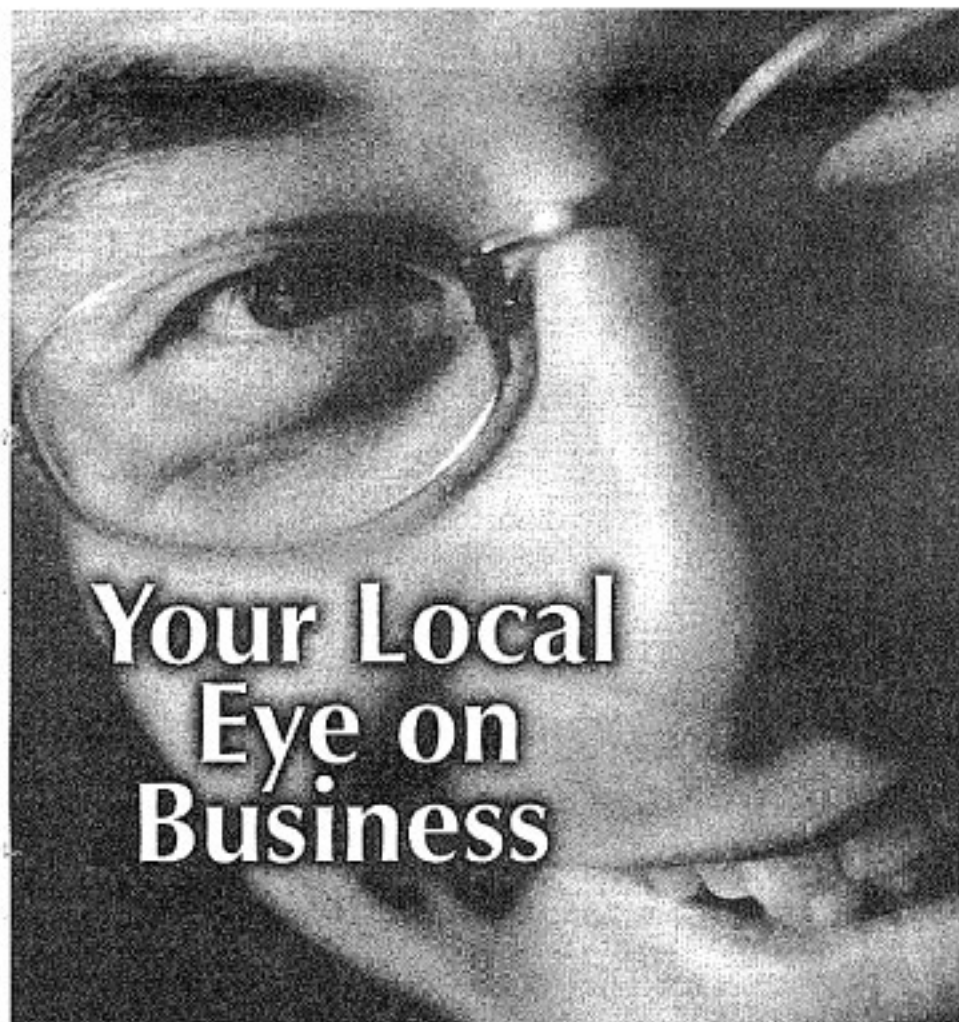
ALTERNATIVE — Rich Lowenstein, owner of Windy Ass Acres in Windsor, visits with some of his baby miniature donkeys. The donkeys are Lowenstein's pets, but he also sells them to qualified buyers.

before signing on the dotted line. "Angora goats need to be kept as calm as possible. If they get stressed, then it throws off their digestion and fiber production."

Martin has three lines of yarn, Mopaca, with mohair blended with alpaca; Mowopaca, a blend of mohair, wool and alpaca; and Mowo, mohair and wool. She dyes the yarns herself.

The other good thing about Angora goats is that, unlike the dairy and meat

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goats, they make good neighbors. They don't have the strong odor of other breeds of goats, and if their surroundings are kept clean, they stay clean.

"Fiber animals are not for everybody, but if you give of yourself, you get so much in return," Martin said.

Braying of miniature donkeys can be heard up and down Colorado Highway 392, thanks to a herd of the tiny creatures at Rich and Deb Lowenstein's Windy Ass Acres. The Lowensteins yearned to leave city life — in this case Fort Collins — and found three acres in a subdivision east of Windsor.

Lowenstein didn't have plans to raise animals, even though he grew up in Grand Island, Neb., where livestock of all kinds is common. His brother, a top miniature donkey breeder in Grand Island, suggested he should do something with livestock, too.

The couple traveled the country talking to people about llamas, emus, ostriches and alpacas. The miniature donkey, however, won their hearts. They started with three donkeys and now have 15. Over the years, he has sold 75 to others who, like him, want to keep livestock on their small acreages.

Lowenstein, ever mindful of his subdivision's covenants, rents an acre from a non-covenanted neighbor. Upkeep includes scooping up manure once to twice a day. He hauls it weekly to a dairy farm north of Severance.

Miniature donkey prices average \$250 to \$2,500 for a pet-quality male and as high for \$25,000 for elite animals. Lowenstein's average sales price is \$500 for a pet-quality male and \$1,400 for a pet-quality female.

Pet quality is not the same as breeding quality, Lowenstein said. Though miniature donkeys are best known for being lovable

creatures, some are used to guard other animals. He tells of one woman who raises peacocks near Cheyenne who acquired miniature donkeys to keep the coyotes at bay. So far, they've done their jobs.

Tim Brough, owner of Colorado Wingsport, said he got into pheasant farming in 1985 as a nontraditional income source. He had obtained a degree in wildlife biology at Colorado State University but didn't want to work for the federal government. Raising pheasants and releasing them in conjunction with running a hunting club seemed to fit the bill.

He raised pheasants for four years before opting to buy mature birds from other pheasant farms. "The biggest reason is the time factor. It's time consuming. I run a couple of shooting ranges as well and it seemed like the smartest move." His farm is on east Vine Street outside of Fort Collins, and he has five hunting fields, three close to Fort Collins and the others a little further east near Black Hollow Reservoir north of Colorado Highway 14.

In his peak years, Brough has had as many as 12,000 birds on his farm, releasing 8,000 annually. He also was into aquaculture, raising trout for private lakes and ponds. He got out of that business in 1995.

He tried marketing both his pheasants and trout to restaurants, but "I was not big enough to compete with the big producers on either scale."

Now, he keeps 1,000 to 1,500 pheasants on hand for his hunting business, trucking in 2,000 game birds at a time. The way it works, hunters sign up for a half-day of hunting. Four birds per hunter are released. They can harvest as many pheasants as they can.

"It's an outdoor gig for the most part," Brough said. "In a recreational business, your consumer comes to you expecting to have a great time."