



# ALL THE WARM FUZZIES

Hot fashion and cuddly creatures at Cotton Creek Farms

By Al Parker

After living in the Detroit area for two decades, Rebecca and Jason Gill longed for a change.

They said good-bye to their long daily commutes, high-stress jobs, and hectic schedules, then planned a relocation to northern Michigan. They sold their home, their lake house and their boats, bidding adieu to friends and swapping a Detroit suburban lifestyle for a quieter rural existence.

They didn't know their dream would turn into one of the fastest-growing alpaca farms in the state, Cotton Creek Farms, nestled between Thompsonville and Buckley.

Alpacas are unique animals that have only been in the U.S. since 1984. They are part of the camel family and were domesticated more than 6,000 years ago. There are roughly 200,000 alpaca in the U.S., while there are some 4 million in South America, about 87 percent of those in Peru.

According to the Alpaca Owners Association (AOA), Ohio has 27,000 alpacas, followed by Washington, Oregon, and Colorado. Michigan has some 8,000 alpacas.

"We realized they were magical creatures," says Rebecca, a Grayling native whose background in sales, marketing, and small business management enables her to handle the farm's website, social media presence, storefront and events. "We also realized alpacas had a large impact on sustainable living and eco-friendly fiber production. When we saw the happiness the alpacas brought to others, we knew the farm was going to be much more than a hobby."

It's turned into a bustling business where the Gills have invested lots of love,

capital, and sweat equity. They immersed themselves in the alpaca culture, learning all they could about bloodlines, fiber quality, genetics, reproduction and health. They visited other farms, attended shows and did tons of research, soaking up all the alpaca knowledge they could from more experienced breeders.

"The more we learned, the more we loved alpacas and everything they offered," says Rebecca.

The farm generates revenues through a variety of avenues, all focused on the alpacas. One of their key products is high-quality fiber that's used in a variety of items, such as bags, blankets, shirts, gloves, mittens, capes, hats, Christmas ornaments, and more.

Similar to sheep shearing, the fiber is harvested once a year in the spring.

"We have professional shearers who come from Montana to do our shearing each May," explains Jason. "This year they did 62 animals in seven-and-a-half hours. Some of the animals had 10 pounds of fiber. We have 500 pounds of fiber now waiting to go to the mill for processing. The animals love it; they run off and roll in the dirt. They feel so much lighter."

Once the fiber is processed at the mill, it's turned over to a team of artisans who make many of the clothing products by hand.

Through their website (cottoncreekfarms.com) they also sell animals, priced from \$1,000 to \$15,000. Over the years, they've sold 45 to 50 alpacas, according to Jason.

"We have a hard time selling them," says Rebecca. "We have to see the buyers set-up and make sure they go to good homes. Many times I've cried when they left."

The Gills began searching for just the right piece of land for their farm in 2015



and finally found a 27-acre parcel, a former Christmas tree farm, the following year.

"The land was raw and needed lots of work," recalls Rebecca. "But it came with a quiet dirt road, a creek, a small pond and beautiful views of sunrises and sunset. You could hear the birds sing, you could smell the fresh air, and occasionally you'd be hit by a passing butterfly. The land was unloved for years, but it was perfect."

First they built a house and barn, then moved north in 2018. In January of 2019 they brought home their first four alpacas.

"Our alpaca farm began with the simple idea of having a few alpacas, sheep, and chickens," recalls Rebecca. "Our goal was a hobby farm to keep Jason busy after retirement."

But once they bought their "Founding Four", they fell in love with the animals. Their herd now numbers between 50 and 60.

Alpacas are larger than their cousin, the vicunas, but smaller than another cousin, the llama. They come in 16 different colors, ranging from shades of whites, beige, fawn, browns, grays, and blacks.

People often confuse alpacas with llamas. But there are several differences.

Llamas are bigger than alpacas in both height and weight. They have longer faces and larger ears. Llamas are bred as pack animals, while alpacas are bred for high-quality luxury fiber. They are timid and more laid-back than llamas.

"They are extremely intelligent and





highly trainable,” says Rebecca. “They are really sweet and bring joy to a lot of people.”

They certainly bring joy to the Gills, who take the time to carefully name all of their alpacas.

“When we were first getting started, Rebecca went to a sale to buy six alpacas,” recalls Jason with a smile. “She bought 17.”

The farm continues to grow. In the spring of this year, the Gills finished building a second barn and an on-site farm market.

That gave them space for educational events and interactive alpaca tours, led by Jason.

“We try to keep them educational and super-friendly,” he explains. “We’ve taken 2,000 people on tours since April. Typical tour size ranges from 12 to 30 people.

We’ve had people from Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo who come just to see the farm.

It’s a destination and we want it to be an experience for them.”

In addition to the weekend tours, Jason’s role is to handle the daily operation of the farm and breeding operations. He also heads up the Michigan Alpaca Association and is a 4-H leader in Grand Traverse County.

“This would be difficult to do without the help of our son, Hunter,” says Jason, who gave up a 20-year automotive career to launch the farm. “He does whatever is needed and really loves the alpacas.”

The Gills are quick to give credit to a lot of folks who have helped them create the farm.

“We’ve had very good mentors in the industry who have helped us,” says Jason. “You know they say it takes a village to raise a child? Well, our farm has been raised by a village.”

### PARTY AT THE FARM

National Alpaca Day

On Sept. 25, the Gills invite the public to help celebrate National Alpaca Farm Day. It’s a free, family friendly event, and the farm will be open to explore. From 10am to 5pm there will be demonstrations, alpaca selfies, food, fun, and more. Call (231) 631-2341 or (248) 760-3586.

### Hot Fashion for Fall (and Frigid Winters)

Cotton Greek Farms sells an impressive array of fashionable yet practical-for-cold-climes clothing, gifts, and even yarn made from sustainable alpaca fiber. Gloves, mittens, sweaters, rugs, and more can be found at the farm store. The items come in vibrant colors or soft earth tones, are durable, attractive, hypoallergenic, and extremely warm. Alpaca clothing and products also naturally repel water, are flame-resistant, and says the Gills, doesn’t itch like wool.

For high quality clothing, toys, gifts, and yarn made from sustainable fiber. Alpaca fiber offers a natural, cruelty free fiber that is luxurious, strong, hypoallergenic, and extremely warm. Alpaca clothing and products also naturally repel water and they are flame resistant.



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