From birth, baby alpacas (called cria) hum constantly. Adults hum, too. It is described by some as a musical purring. Alpacas hum when they are curious, content, worried, bored, fearful, distressed or cautious.

The general reaction to first seeing an alpaca is an urge to squeeze one. They are serene, soft, gentle, alert, friendly, quirky and intelligent. People are drawn to alpacas by their big eyes, humming sounds, gorgeous fur and a quiet energy. “These animals are a complete joy,” says Jennifer Ely, co-owner of award-winning Sage Bluff Alpacas in Prosser. Jennifer and her husband, John, are seven years into alpaca care and family farm management.

They do it all—hauling hay, hauling animals, vaccinations, animal husbandry, trimming toenails, bridle training, events, open houses, brokering and mentoring first-time alpaca owners and curious visitors.

The Elys never thought they would be alpaca farmers. “Ten years ago, I was still in the corporate world polishing my nails and ironing my blue jeans,” says Jennifer.

Both Jennifer and John spent their
working years on the East Coast, eventually coming back to the family farm in Prosser.

“My parents decided to move into town about the time we were adding alpacas to our lives, so it just made sense to keep the farm in the family,” says John.

“John is brilliant at managing the property and coming up with great ideas to improve our efficiencies,” says Jennifer. “He cares for the daily routines of feeding the alpacas and cleaning pastures. In fact, he calls himself the CPO of SBA—the Chief Poo Officer—and he gets rave reviews from visitors who enjoy their farm tours and John's fun stories. We had bought alpacas before we even had country property. We actually boarded them for two years before moving to the farm.”

Now they have 40 alpacas on 4½ acres. Alpacas were domesticated in Peru for more than 5,000 years. About 170,000 alpacas are now raised in the U.S.

“We are very intentional in this country in our breeding practices,” Jennifer says. “For example, we will examine strengths and weaknesses including confirmation, genetics and fiber characteristics of a female alpaca and pair those with a male who will complement strengths and improve her weaknesses. The goal is that every cria is an improvement.”

Sage Bluff Alpacas’ mission is breeding alpacas of exceptional conformation, fleece and disposition; forming strong bonds with new and existing breeders; sharing knowledge and supporting the growth of national livestock and fiber industries; and, most importantly, have a blast doing it.

“We quickly figured out that our niche in alpacas is mentoring new owners,” says Jennifer. “Whether they want alpacas for pets, for a fiber herd or for breeding, we just love teaching others. We want people to understand about the care, breeding, training and handling of the alpacas. We want them to come to the farm, spend time with us and the alpacas.”

In the last five years, the Elys have developed different revenue streams within their business.

“Foremost, we sell alpacas as breeding stock, for fiber production and as pets,” Jennifer says. “We offer breedings to our herd sires, we board other people’s alpacas and broker the sale of alpacas for others. We sell fiber and fiber products from our own alpacas, as well as the beautiful retail lines we carry in our farm store.”

At the farm there are a number of events throughout the year for the public to tour the farm and learn about alpacas. At the spring fiber harvest, the alpacas are sheared and fiber is harvested to be turned into clothing, scarves and hats.

Shearing is done in the spring so the alpacas are ready for hot Eastern Washington summers. There are 22 registered colors of natural fiber and the fiber isn’t dyed unless green or blue fiber is desired. The fiber quality is determined by fineness, staple length that helps it hold together, density of fleece that varies on the number of skeins, and brightness and uniformity.

“Visitors will see nearly naked alpacas that are hysterical looking at this time of year,” Jennifer says. “Most are shorn down to their top-knots. Some of the youngest are shorn with bobble heads and pantaloons.”

In the warmer months, the farm holds the Spin-In event. Fiber artists from throughout the Yakima Valley gather at the farm for the annual Summer Fiber Arts Festival. Members of the Desert Fiber Arts Guild attend the event and enjoy sharing their skills. They demonstrate techniques including spinning, weaving, felting and knitting.

In the fall, National Alpaca Farm Days is celebrated. Visitors meet the alpacas, take farm tours, talk with breeders, see fiber arts demonstrations, shop alpaca retail and enjoy refreshments.

For Jennifer, alpacas are life altering. “My life is really truly balanced for the first time,” says Jennifer. “Every day, I have a reason to be outside doing fun physical work in the fresh air.”

The other side of that balance is working in her office on farm business administration, both regionally and nationally.

“We love our alpacas, alpaca friends, and rural lifestyle, and sharing it with others,” says John.

“When it stops being fun we will do something different,” adds Jennifer. “I haven’t wiped the grin off my face in seven years. Living with them is a privilege.”