

Mr. Chip - *A Miracle Survivor*

By Gordon Ratcliff

Everybody who has raised alpacas for more than a couple of years has their own story of a miracle cria - one that defied all odds to be born and then survive. We believe that this one makes it into the record books by being a miracle birth in every sense of the word.

A couple of years ago Florida was hit hard by hurricanes. Several came over our farm within a few weeks, spawning tornadoes in their wake, and our alpaca birthing schedules were seriously impacted. Three or four births were premature, and we had to intercede several times and bottle feed the cria when Mom had no milk (or colostrum) for the unexpected new arrival.

One night in late October it was cold when we returned to the farm around 10:15 after having dinner in a nearby town. Gillian, my wife, went to check "the kids," as we called our small herd of 15-18 alpacas, and I went to let the dogs out. Moments later, she came running; she gestured for me to come and see something over near the barn.

A silver/white object that looked like something an archeologist might have unearthed was lying on the ground. Six or seven alpacas were standing around it in a half-circle. Cookie, a large brown female, was



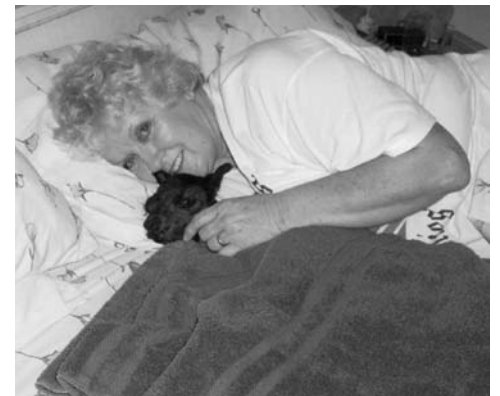
making a moaning noise. As I stooped over the object, I could see that it was, or had been, a newborn cria. It was cold to my touch and showed no movement and was still wrapped in the birth membrane - hence the silver/white color in the moonlight. Sadly, I picked it up and carried it into the barn where, out of habit, I weighed it. A fraction over six pounds - poor little beggar! He had no chance of surviving; the smallest premature cria would have to be 10 pounds or more to stand a chance - according to the books I had read.

Again, out of habit, I started to pull the membrane from around the body. It was dry and came off easily, but, as I did so, I thought I saw an eyelid flicker. Quickly, I wrapped the body in a thick towel around the cria and ran inside where, while warming it with the help of a hair drier and a bucket of warm water, we managed to establish that it was a little male cria, with a brown curly coat, and that it was still alive!

Feverishly we worked on the little guy until we saw, to our great joy, that he was beginning to respond to our warming efforts - his eyes fluttered and his mouth opened and closed. Gillian checked the mother and discovered, to no one's surprise, that she

had no milk, so we made up some synthetic colostrum and tried to give it to the little guy with a bottle. He was so tiny - just a bag of bones with little or no flesh on him. He could not support his head as his neck was so thin and weak, and his long, gangly legs looked like elongated, articulated Q-tips with tiny feet on the ends. We thought we were wasting our time, but we persevered and finally got him to accept one or two drops of life-giving colostrum through an eye dropper. Every few minutes, we gave him one or two more drops, which was all he could handle.

His eyes remained closed, but his temperature was slowly rising. Soon his breathing became stronger, and his heartbeat stabilized. It was now late, and we wondered what we could do with him overnight. Obviously we couldn't abandon him, and his mother had nothing for him; besides, it was cold outside, so we did what anyone would do in our situation - we took him to bed with us. He spent that night, and several nights thereafter, sleeping between us in our bed.



We took turns throughout the first night to squeeze precious drops of fluid into his tiny mouth at 15 or 20 minute intervals. His mother, Cookie, stood outside the window looking sadly into the house all night long. Like us, she was pulling for him to make it.





Premie in the house

During the following day, we took him to the barn to see and be with his mom, hoping that she would not orphan him. She fussed over him and "clicked" at him, but she still had no milk for him. He was far too small to butt her bag to help induce her milk, so we had to keep feeding him - first synthetic colostrum, then goat's milk & vitamins, and then full cow's milk. During that first day, his eyes opened and he began to walk slowly and very uncertainly on his skinny, un-muscled legs, but he walked and that was a major step forward (pun intended). A major milestone! We hoped and prayed that maybe we could win this one.

After a couple of days, we gave him his own bed. It was next to our bed so that I could reach down and feed him during the night. He took to this quite readily, sleeping on his side with his head on the pillow just like a human.

Each day we took him to spend time in the barn with his mother, and

she amazed us by showing great interest in him and showed no signs of orphaning him. She still had no milk. By this time he would follow us around the house in the evenings and would come to us when we offered him a bottle of milk, and he was now able to drink from a full-sized bottle with a Pritchard nipple.

Then, after several days, his mother's milk came in. We were delighted. He had gained almost three pounds and was able to reach his mother's teats. At this point we felt we could safely name him. He was a chip off the old block; his mother was Fudge Cookie, so we thought of calling him Chocolate Chip. His amazing will to fight for life warranted our respect, so we named him Mr. Chip.

Day after day, he grew stronger, taller, heavier, and more energetic. During the day he mixed with the other youngsters and began to run with them, as well as to neck wrestle with them, until at last we felt comfortable allowing him to spend the

nights with his mother and the other alpacas. We were sad that he no longer slept with us and ran around the house at night, but he had to return to his natural environment. He was becoming an ordinary little guy - one of the herd - but we knew he was anything but ordinary.

Mr. Chip went through several more crises before he grew to full adulthood - alpaca preemies often have problems due to their failure to develop fully before being born. Suffice it to say he fought as hard overcoming these problems as he had surviving his initial days as a weak, almost dead, premature cria. He is now almost three years old and lives an active life in West Virginia with many of the herd that he was born into that cold October night in Florida.



**Did you read the article
on pages 42 & 43
of the last issue? It
describes a treatment
program that can sustain
and aid the recovery of
an ill camelid. It's worth
your time to check it out.**