

From Duck, Goose and Brant Shooting
by Dr. William Bruette, editor of
Forest and Stream magazine.
Published by G. Howard Watt, NY City, 1929.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TOLLING DOG

The idea of tolling ducks came from the fact that the fox is known to attract wildfowl by his color and movements along the shores of inland lakes and the sea coast.

This inquisitiveness can be taken advantage of with a dog of suitable size and color properly trained—wherever ducks are inclined to pack in open water adjacent to a clear beach line. It is a form of shooting at one time popular along the New England coast but in later years has been almost entirely confined to Nova Scotia.

The ducks most responsive to the antics of a tolling dog are the redheads, the black duck and the bluebill as well as the butterball and the merganser. The whistler, on the contrary, will spring into the air at the sight of a tolling dog while sea ducks, fish ducks, coots, etc., are indifferent to their presence.

If you have never seen a tolling dog work, meet me before daylight at my blind on the edge of the sandy shore of a bay where I know black ducks congregate, was the invitation of the late H. A. P. Smith, a Nova Scotia sportsman who was a keen admirer of the tolling dog.

The blind composed of three or four old lobster pots that have been cast ashore in the surf and a few old roots of trees covered with dead seaweed is just large enough to hide us and the dog. We make ourselves as comfortable as possible, our coat collars up and caps well down (for the month is December and it is cold, lakes are frozen and ducks are on their winter feeding grounds). As you turn your head you see the yellow flicker of the lamp in the kitchen window of the farmhouse across the great salt marsh behind us where an hour ago we were enjoying the warmth from the big wood stove and a breakfast of fresh eggs and biscuit, washed down with steaming tea. It is "star ca", not a breath of air, and very frosty. Our dog Buff is curled up tight, his fox-like tail covering his nose. He is the only one of us that is comfortably warm. The trembling quack of the black ducks reaches us from out there in the bay. Buff hears them

206

THE TOLLING DOG

and his ears prick as he raises his head. Touch him now and you will feel him trembling with suppressed excitement. The east begins to pale and presently objects are dimly discernible. The old stake butts stuck up out there in the sand look like a flock of geese and in the gray light the bridge spanning the North Creek looms up like a church spire. There is the winnow of wings as ducks fly from the salt creeks where they have spent the night and a commotion as they join their companions in the bay in front of us.

Presently a black line on the glassy surface of the water slowly develops into a flock of 20 birds or more. The tide is nearly up to our blind and everything seems favorable. The ducks are now in plain sight—foxy old beggars. Some of them know the danger zone of this shore. Two hundred yards away they flap their wings and preen their feathers as the rising sun warms them up. It is time for us to "show the dog." From the pocket of the hunting coat comes a hard rubber ball. It is what Buff has been waiting for. The pupils of his eyes dilate as he watches that sphere of rubber. Next to his master it is the dearest thing to him on earth. One bounce of it will lure him from a dish of beef scraps and gravy without a moment's hesitation.

It seems a shame to scare these ducks. Perhaps they will come to shore as the tide begins to fall and you cannot help feeling certain that every duck will "jump" as soon as they see the dog. But wait, you watch the ducks and you do not shoot until the word is given for it is the ruination of a tolling dog to shoot over him while he is outside the blind. If you do so he will soon want the first shot himself and when the birds come close he will be inclined to plunge in after them without waiting for the gun.

Smooth patches of sand stretch out upon each side and afford a perfect footing for the dog and we can play him upon either side of the blind. The ball is tossed down the beach, it rolls along the sands and away goes Buff; he picks it up and canters back and drops it into his master's hand. Out again goes ball and dog. Through the "peekhole" in the seaweed we anxiously watch the birds. With stretched necks and wondering eyes every duck looks intently at the dog. The ball falls in among some dead seaweed and as he noses about to find it his busy tail wiggles above the beach grass. A dozen birds turn and swim for shore, their necks stretched so long a second ago, disappear as they fold them in and with soft meamp-amp, meamp, swim rapidly toward us with a gentle air of wind behind them. Buff plays beautifully, returning with the ball even faster than he romps

after it. How round the birds look with their necks drawn in, giving them a stupid appearance while the sunlight shimmers from the yellow bills of the drakes. Now as the dog comes toward us the hot scent of the black ducks smites his sensitive nostrils and he stops with upraised paw and looks toward them but a chirp brings him back to us. Not for worlds would he refuse to "play." He trembles as he sees us push up the safeties of our guns. The birds are now right against us though not well bunched, being strung out across our front. They are only thirty-five yards or so away when Buff drops the ball into the open palm for the last time. There is a whispered "down." There is one of two things to do. We may either raise up and shoot, picking out our birds and trying to stop one with each barrel, or remain quiet until the ducks begin to get uneasy and not seeing the dog start to swim away when they will invariably bunch.

If you can forget the freezing nights and blustery days when you have almost perished waiting for a shot, or the long crawls through slush or mud when trying to stalk these wariest of all their kind we can each try for a double and be satisfied. If, however, you have only occasionally had a flock shot and would like one now we will hold our fire. See that old drake stretch his neck and swim up and down, looking with the keenest of all eyes and turning slowly from us; see how the birds swim together with their heads turned sideways as they look over their shoulders at the blind. A nod and two pairs of 12-bore barrels loaded with $3\frac{1}{2}$ drams of smokeless and $1\frac{1}{4}$ ounce No. 2, poke out above the fringe of seaweed of the blind. As we raise to shoot Buff peeks over the blind. With a whimper his muscles stiffen as he awaits the report. Both shots ring out as one and into the air seven terrified birds spring straight up, three of their number falling to our second barrels. There are two cripples, one of which swims about in little circles, shot through the head in front of the eyes. We wade out as far as hip rubbers will allow and each kills his bird.

Buff by this time has almost reached the nearest drifting victims. Watch him swim! There is only one breed of dog could catch him now and that is the tolling dog. No need to tell him to retrieve. Dropping his bird on the sand he plunges in again and again until the eighth and last duck is safely recovered. Then he takes a shake and roll in the sand, rubs against his master's leg and he looks up into his face as he strokes his wet hair—wet only on the outside for no water ever penetrates to the skin through that otter coat—and if I were alone I would take his honest head between my hands and

whisper in his ear, "Good Boy," while with a feebly little growl in his throat he would say in his own way, "We did the trick."

The tolling dogs as a rule come from families which for generations have been trained to race up and down a stretch of open beach and by their antics and activities attract the attention of flocks of ducks that are resting out of gunshot, whose curiosity leads them to swim in slowly to the shore until they come within easy range of a blind in which the gunners are concealed.

The history of the breed as related by Mr. Smith is as follows: In the late sixties James Allen of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, secured from the captain of a corn-laden schooner a female flat-coated English retriever; color, dark red; weight, about forty pounds. Mr. Allen had her lined with a Labrador dog which was a fine retriever. The first litter of pups made very large dogs, even larger than their parents and were splendid duck dogs. Several of these bitches were bred to a brown cocker spaniel imported into this province from Massachusetts. Later a cross of the Irish Setter was introduced. These dogs have been bred throughout Yarmouth county, particularly at Little River and Comeau's Hill and the majority of them are a reddish-brown color from the end of the nose to the tip of the bushy tail, save a white dash on the broad chest and in some specimens a white blaze in the face; weight about fifty pounds (bitches, forty), height at the shoulder 20 inches, wide-skulled, with moderately large pendent ears. Occasionally a black pup appears and of course makes just as good a retriever and water dog as his red brothers but it is not so valuable because he cannot be used as a toller.

As a surf dog the toller has no equal and will persevere again and again until at last he stems the undertow. Last winter I feared I had lost Buff upon two occasions. Shooting from this very blind I wing-broke a black duck and giving chase the dog swam after his bird straight out to sea beyond my anxious sight. The tide had turned and I ran along the shore with frantic haste trying to locate a boat, away past Read Head, two miles below us, until at last I gave it up and sorrowfully returned to fetch my gun which I left in the blind. My dog's little faults were all forgotten and every cross word spoken to him regretted when to my surprise and joy upon reaching the blind there lay the game little dog with the duck beside him. The distance he swam by conservative estimation through the ice-cold water must have exceeded three miles and he seemed none the worse for it.

Upon the other occasion while flight shooting by moonlight up the

wide creek you see beyond the bridge there a wing-tipped duck fell among the floating, grinding ice cakes, rushing together with the force of the heavy incoming tide. Away went Buff right into the worst of it, both dog and bird disappearing beneath the floe. It seemed ages until his head at last appeared in the moon blaze with the bird safely held between his jaws. And now let me tell you that ducks will not toll to windward. They will come to the dog across wind, or as you have just seen from the windward and also when there is no wind. Black ducks toll with their heads drawn down, bluebills with their heads up and necks stuck out, butterballs on their tails almost and all the mergansers with heads erect and necks straight up. Perhaps the tolling dog is most deadly when shooting ducks before they leave the lakes in the fall and when the birds are young. I have seen young black ducks swim so near the blind, that their pads could be distinctly seen beneath the water. Bluebills are said to be the easiest of all birds to toll, but although I have had many fine shots at them in this manner my personal experience teaches me that the black duck tolls the best and I have seen old wary birds in the month of January act like perfect fools at sight of a well-played dog. They seem to be hypnotized and when once their gaze has become centered upon the dog will scarcely notice moving objects.

It is as natural for a tolling dog to retrieve and play with a stick or other object thrown as it is for a setter to point, or a coach dog to follow a team. Most duck shooters use a stick to toll their dogs with and some a lot of sticks but the properly trained dog needs but the one object to work upon.