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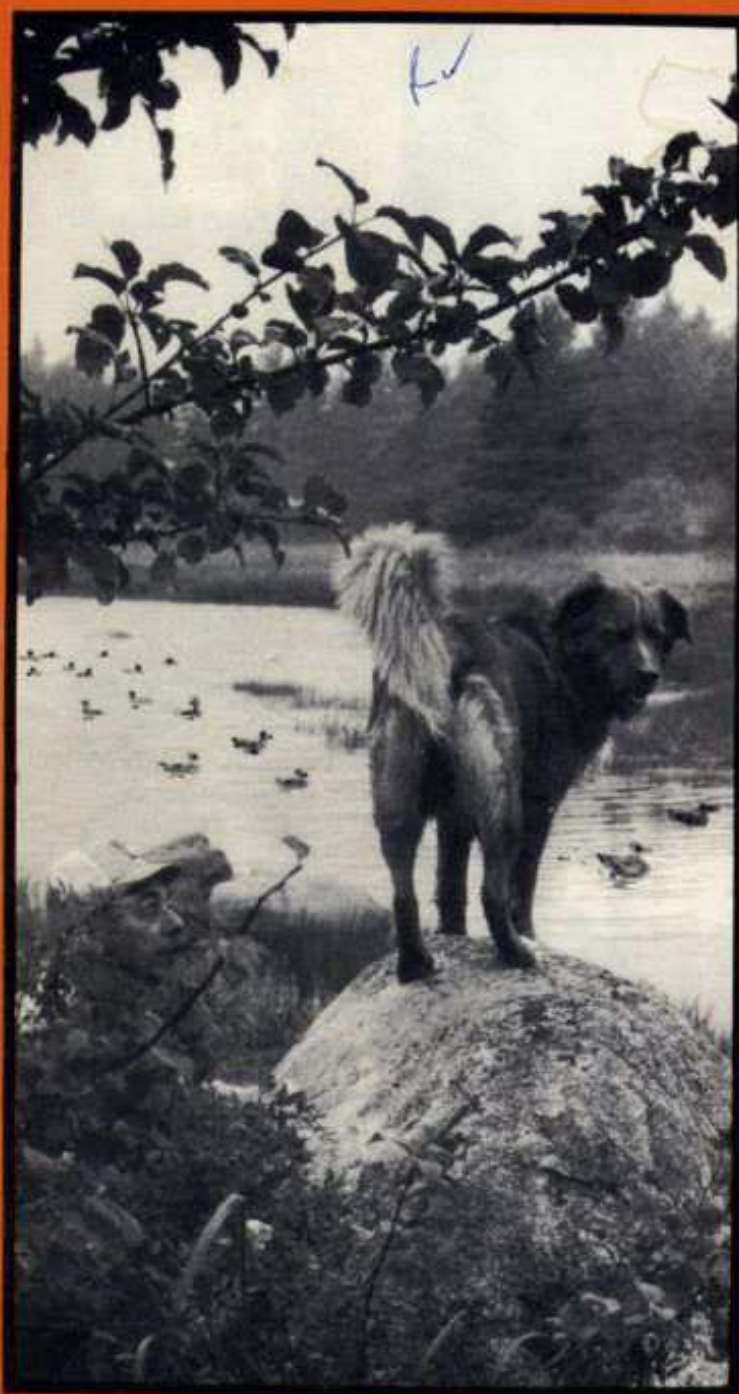
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Nova Scotia's

Tolling Dog

Evelyn Richardson

Sea Story

Natural Dyes

Sea Monsters

Nova Scotia's Tolling Dog

by William D. Sutherland

Yes, Nova Scotia has a dog all its own, commonly called the Little River Duck Dog, and more properly, by its official title, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. The Canadian Kennel Club name is not used commonly by local people who know the dog, and, here in western Nova Scotia, it is usually referred to as the Little River. Little River is a small settlement in Yarmouth County in the extreme western part of this province and it is here that this wonderful dog had its early origins and much of its development.

Dogs are bred for a purpose, and the Little River was bred for duck shooting or 'gunning', to use a local term and many of these dogs are named Gunner by the local hunters. Dogs for duck shooting are ordinarily retrievers that bring back the downed game to the hunter but the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever does much more than just retrieve. It is not called a "toller" for nothing. This breed of dog actually entices or draws the waterfowl within easy range of the waiting hunters. Some readers, I am sure will have their doubts about this attribute of these dogs but it is all very true.

The Little River Duck Dog originated in Yarmouth County but the real facts are veiled in mysteries as thick as the fogs that shroud this part of the Nova Scotia coast, from time to time. This portion of Yarmouth County was settled by Acadians. The topography of this area of Nova Scotia was vastly different from many of the other Acadian settlements—the rolling farmlands of Chignecto and the diked meadows of Grand Pre. These southwestern Nova Scotia settlements were in a harsh land, rocky, heavily wooded and exposed to the everchanging moods of the Atlantic. The Acadians' mainstay of survival was hunting and fishing. The Black Duck in particular frequented the area in vast numbers in the fall and winter and was a very important part of their diet. The Canadian Wildlife Surveys of 1947-50 found flocks of wintering Black Ducks in this area numbering 20,000 birds. One can only guess at the size of the wintering flocks two hundred years ago, before the encroachment of man, but there is no doubt they would be several times larger than that figure.

The Little River Dog was thus developed out of the necessity for survival. The objective was to develop an excellent retriever that could withstand the strong tides and cold, rough waters of the area and also bring the quarry within easy range of the musket where maximum kill could be made with a minimum expenditure of powder and shot.

What the early specimens of the breed looked like no one really knows but it is a reasonable assumption to think that they were not much dif-



*Bill Sutherland and Brooks,
a Nova Scotia toller.*

ferent from the modern specimens in appearance and character. My personal experience with these dogs spans about forty years and in that time breeders have cemented still further the dominant characteristics of the breed. They have not been watered down like so many other breeds; in other words they still are what they were, only more so.

Well, what are they? What do they look like? The illustrations hopefully will give some clues to their appearance, which is of a very muscular, heavy boned dog of medium size. A mature male weighs about fifty pounds and a mature female about thirty-five pounds. The head resembles that of a Golden Retriever. It has a medium neck, very straight forelegs with strong nails and, of course, well webbed feet, and it is deep chested, with the belly well drawn up. A very dominant feature of these dogs is the beautiful, well plumed, incessantly wagging tail that is carried above the line of the back. The colour varies with individual dogs from fawn to red, only slightly lighter than an Irish Setter. Many dogs carry a white blaze on the forehead and chest with a bit on the toes and the tip of the tail. The coat is long, sleek and very soft, particularly at the throat and ears. The dense undercoat enables these dogs to function as retrievers during the coldest weather. The colouring should resemble that of a red fox, this being deemed necessary for the tolling function of this breed.

The origins of the breed are not known for certain, and many local fables still persist that the first forebears came from a ship wrecked off Pinkney's Point. Others say that the forebears were Brittany Spaniels, Collies,

Spitz, Golden Retrievers, Irish Setters, etc. The truth about the origin of the Little River Dog will always remain in the shadowed recesses of our history.

However, it is well known that the dogs were in constant use throughout the 19th Century, though confined to the immediate locale of Yarmouth County. By the beginnings of the present Century, the Little River was a very distinct breed and had become well known to the waterfowl hunters of Yarmouth County, and a gradual spread into the neighbouring county of Shelburne took place.

My personal involvement with these dogs goes back to about 1936, when my father, William Sutherland of Lockeport, N.S., merchant and waterfowl hunter, became involved with Colonel Cyril Colwell of Halifax. I was a small boy at the time, but was very impressed every time Col. Colwell arrived at our home with his beautiful, well-trained dogs. I don't know how Col. Colwell became involved with breeding Little Rivers, nor do I know how he became acquainted with my father, but I do know that Col. Colwell was very instrumental in having the breed recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club. The Little River Duck Dog officially became known as The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever during the 1940's. We had our first puppy of this breed at about this time, but he was not with us very long, due to an unfortunate incident. The next year, my father acquired a registered puppy. Aptly named Colonel, he remained with us for over fourteen years.

To a growing boy, in his early teens who loved to hunt and fish, the arrival of Colonel at our home was a dream beyond belief come true. He was a wonderful companion, lovable family pet, superb retriever from both land and water, and a toller without par. I recall the time he came ashore with two Black Ducks at once, one hanging out of each side of his mouth. Another time, he retrieved a crippled goose from wind-whipt, ice-choked water. And picture him tumbling end over end down the side of a steep hill, with a wing tipped goose doing battle all the way.

Colonel was enthusiastic, but, at the same time, cool and calculating when hunting; having the innate ability to do the right thing at the right time. He never let me down.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever fell on somewhat evil days during the 1950's and was perhaps in danger of extinction, but today, happily, the breed is again flourishing, with a number of very reputable breeders, and the dogs are just beginning to receive the publicity and distribution that they deserve. Much of the credit for the revitalization of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever belongs to Mr. Avery Nickerson of Yarmouth, N.S., who has been a successful breeder of these dogs for the last twenty-five years.

I am the proud owner of one of Mr. Avery Nickerson's dogs and he is so like the Colonel we had thirty-five years ago that it is a bit scary, but nevertheless, is quite indicative they are the same dogs - but probably better than their forebears.



Bill Sutherland (Sr.), Harold Goucher, Colonel and string of ducks. Mid 40's.

Up to this point, nothing has been said about tolling, which is of course, what makes the Nova Scotia Tolling Retriever distinct from the other breeds of retrievers. Tolling is using a dog to entice or draw wild ducks and geese within easy range of the hunter. Tolling was practiced in England and Holland hundreds of years ago, to lure ducks into netted enclosures, where they could be easily captured. Perhaps the early settlers brought the art of duck tolling to North America, because it flourished along the eastern seaboard of the United States well over one hundred years ago. This theory, perhaps, is not the answer because our native red fox is a very accomplished toller and gets many a duck dinner by this method. It is only speculation how the early settlers of Yarmouth County learned about tolling ducks, but we do know their dogs were bred to resemble foxes, which sort of speaks for itself.

The tolling act is performed by the dog running, jumping and playing along the shoreline in full view of a flock of ducks. The dog will occasionally disappear from sight, then reappear quickly. This performance by the dog can be aided by its master throwing small sticks or a ball, but many of the dogs are just told to go out and toll, and need no direction from anyone. The birds will swim rapidly and sometimes fly towards the dog from distances of one-half a mile or more. When the ducks get within gun range, the dog is usually called into the blind before the shooting begins, because there is a great danger of accidentally shooting the dog if this is not done. Large flocks of waterfowl, numbering in the hundreds, can thus be enticed within range, creating the possibility for extremely large kills to be made by experienced hunters, and the Little River then comes into his own as a very capable retriever. They are dogs of great courage and I have seen them swim out of sight after a cripple in cold, rough water. Tolling is unquestionably the most

effective means of enticing waterfowl within gun range that has ever been devised.

Conservationists, no doubt, are shuddering at the thought, but it is not as simple as all that. With the heavy hunting pressure of today and the widespread use of powerboats, it is very, very difficult to locate flocks of undisturbed waterfowl to toll. However, if you want to take good waterfowl pictures, the combination of camera and a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever cannot be surpassed. It is a lot more fun than shooting, the rewards are lasting, and it is a rich and moving experience that will not be soon forgotten.

It is most difficult to find words to describe the personality and character of these dogs and still do them justice. This, above all, from personal experience, Little Rivers love people and desire to take part in all family activities. They are extremely playful and remain that way all of their lives. Being natural retrievers, they are usually carrying something. These dogs are very even tempered and very easy to train, being exceptionally quick to learn and slow to forget. They are good watch dogs and are quick to sound the alarm, should the need arise. When in action, they work with great enthusiasm, speed, agility and super-fast reflexes, retrieving readily from either land or water, with good noses, excellent hearing and sight. Brooks, the one I have now, can spot a duck as far as I can.

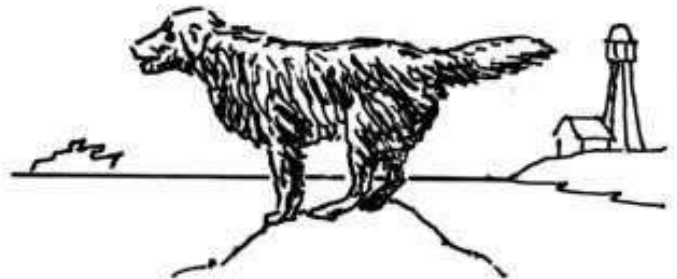
Don't think you have to be a hunter to enjoy owning one of these splendid dogs. They are, without exception, one of the most versatile of all breeds, because their attributes are so widespread.

Nova Scotia's dog, the Little River Duck Dog, or more properly, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, is part of our heritage. Much is owed to men like Colonel Cyril Colwell, Mr. Fred Armstrong, Mr. Eldon Pace, Mr. Avery Nickerson, Mr. James C. Jeffery and others, for preserving the breed, and indeed fostering it. Dog lovers of today can still enjoy the pride of owning, perhaps the only breed truly developed in Canada - certainly Nova Scotia's own dog. ●



Red and Susan, owned by James C. Jeffery. Red was champion toller in 1970.

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