

A VISIT WITH JAMES HERRIOT

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DOG WORLD

APRIL 1992

A MACLEAN HUNTER PUBLICATION

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Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever • Retriever Duck Tolling de la Nouvelle-Écosse



Meet the Nova Scotia Duck Toller

Here's the Nova Scotia Duck Toller

This little retriever with the big name has as many facets as it does fans

By Gretchen Botner

What breed is that?" These frequently are the first words a Toller owner hears. It may be at a show, in the field or out in the front yard. Toller owners are prepared and know the conversation will start as soon as they say, "Why, it's a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever." After a pause and perhaps an embarrassed chuckle will come the response Toller owners expect and have come to enjoy: "It's a *what?*"

Toller owners have lots of ways of describing the dog, depending on their lifestyle and the way the dog fits in it. "It's the best upland hunting dog I've had. Don't go in the field with a Toller without a gun," one hunter says. Another tells of hunting on a 12-degree day: "The Tollers kept breaking ice to retrieve the ducks. They were covered in ice but didn't even shiver."

Yet another describes how the dog gives him a look of disgust if he misses a shot. "The hunter gets a real retriever and the family gets a dog that can't



Clockwise from top left: HR Harbourlights Trapper Jack, owned by Joe Reid of Texas. Riverbear Newgene, owned by Pat and Elaine Dupras of New York. Cinnstar's Southern Fundy Fox, WC, owned, bred and trained by Laura Grossman Lofton, Cinnstar Little Rivers. Stephanie and Nicholas Botner of Florida hold a seven-week-old litter from Tradewinds Kennel.

SPECIAL FEATURE

steal food off the counter," one owner says. In many cases the Toller is the first retriever allowed in the house to be a part of the family.

But hunting isn't the only activity these little dogs with the big hearts share with their owners. Tollers compete successfully in the obedience ring; trainers talk about the intelligence, attentiveness and playful spirit of the dog. Show ring competitors describe the dog as having a "Here I am, pick me" attitude and a saucy, flirting relationship with judges. Toller owners have found the dog to work well in pet-facilitated therapy because the natural inquisitiveness of the Toller makes each person visited a new adventure for the dog. Above all, the Toller family can talk for hours about the way the "little

Generally one must define tolling. One definition is "to lure or to entice to come nearer." The writings of his-

bling the red fox could be bred for hunting in this fashion.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, commonly called the Toller, initially was developed in the Little River district of Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia. From that area it drew its original name, the Little River Duck Dog. The most commonly quoted version of the breed's origin is that in 1860, James Allen obtained from a schooner captain a liver-colored female Flat-Coated Retriever. Allen bred this dog to a short-coated



Clockwise from top: Jalna's Zippy Zinfandel, CD, is the first Toller to be a Canine Good Citizen. The dual-registered therapy dog, shown with Beckie Humanik, is owned by Diana Humanik, Nebraska. Cinnstar's Russet Vixen at eight weeks, owned by Elizabeth and Glenn White, Oregon. Sylvan's Winter Rose at nine months, owned, bred and trained by Sue Van Sloun, Sylvan Kennel, Massachusetts. Jalna's Hotshot Hunter, owned by Rene Rocque of Wisconsin.



red dog" has won its place in the family and home—especially if there are children.

The recurring theme among Toller owners is that the dog just seems to fit in. It is the total companion and will be what the family wants it to be, whether in the duck blind in the field, in the show or obedience ring or on the couch when you have the flu.

torian H.C. Fokhard tell of two English hunters who observed the antics of two foxes along a shoreline. As the ducks became curious about the movement, they drew closer and closer and eventually became dinner for the foxes.

This story was passed down through generations of hunters with the idea that someday a dog resem-

retriever similar to the Labrador. Bitches from this breeding were then bred to a brown Cocker Spaniel. Shortly after that, a cross to an Irish Setter introduced the red color of today's Toller. It's also possible that subsequent breedings introduced a Border Collie or Shetland Sheepdog to help set the

size and to introduce the heavily feathered tail and the herding instinct the Toller possesses. It is also not possible to rule out breedings with Brittany's, Golden Retrievers and perhaps the Chesapeake Bay Retriever.

The goal of Allen and his successors was a dog that resembled the red fox physically as well as in its intelligence and playfulness, but which also included the abilities of the larger retrievers and the hunting instincts and skills of the Sporting group generally.

Through the efforts of Cyril Coldwell of Halifax, the breed was recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club in 1945; at that time the name was changed to the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever.

Today's Toller is a very intelligent dog. One owner says that at about six months the dog woke up and just seemed to be tuned in to the family. The dog responds to many cues of

normal family life. Rarely can an owner pick up keys and not find the Toller at the back door. The click of a round being chambered in the gun will light up the dog's eyes and it will raise up almost on tiptoes.

Sometimes these cues aren't so obvious. One owner finds the dog sleeps next to the bed of any person in the house who is catching a cold, before anyone knows the illness is upon him or her. It's this cue-taking that makes the dog fit in and is also a component of the breed's apparent clannishness and standoffish attitude toward strangers. Without knowledge of a stranger's cues, the Toller is a rapt observer for a short time; if "the boss" accepts the stranger, the dog does too.

The Toller is a medium-size dog of 44 to 50 pounds and 19 to 20 inches for males and 37 to 42 pounds and 18 inches for females. The color is a shade of red ranging from a deep red to a fawn. Most have some white markings on toes, chest, head, belly and tip of the tail. The coat is a true retriever double coat; the outer coat waterproofs the dog while the inner one insulates him. The Toller is truly a wash-and-wear breed. The dogs can come out of the duck pond covered in mud and in about 30 minutes be ready to enter the house without dirt, dust or odor in the coat. The tail is well-feathered and carried high and merrily when in action, and no breed can spring into action quicker. As puppies Tollers learn quickly and with attention and work by the owner, they can be hunting by seven or eight months of age.

The Toller is a hunter and can be productive in a variety of situations. While the breed was developed for waterfowl, many are used in the upland. They flush well and seem to sit naturally on the flush. They hunt close, don't roam and are equally comfortable whether the scent is on the ground or in the air.

One hunter tells of returning from the hunt when a deer crossed the narrow dirt road about 50 yards ahead of the truck. The dogs were riding in crates in the back of the truck and didn't notice the deer cross the road. When the truck crossed the path of the deer, the dogs arose from the crate floors and began to yip with excitement. This hunter doesn't use Tollers to hunt deer, but tells the story to show the dog's gameness to hunt anything.

The Toller is a bit different to train from other retriever breeds. While the dog is intelligent, sometimes the trainer will almost have to explain why he or she wants the Toller to do this or that. This may again be the issue of cues—

that when learning a new skill, the Toller has insufficient cues to understand and wants to learn by observing while the trainer wants the dog to learn by doing. However, once the Toller has acquired a skill, you won't have to review it often.

The ability to take cues, which helps the Toller fit in with the family, carries over into the field. The dog knows when it's time to work and time to play. The dog is also very open and gives the hunter cues as well. It doesn't take long for a Toller owner to learn when his dog is on a fresh trail or a cold one just by the dog's body language. Tollers are taught to handle for blind retrieves just as are other retriever breeds.

Many Toller owners who compete in obedience report that the dog is happiest when working. However, they also report the Toller has its own timetable for learning.

In the Northwest one owner uses the Toller to hunt in steep and brushy terrain for grouse and quail. The dog has learned to use the trails through the brush made by raccoons and other wild animals. This means the dog can get to birds that larger dogs might not be able to find because of the density of the brush. In short, the reports of hunters with Tollers is that they adapt well to both the conditions of the hunting environment and to the game being hunted.

But the Toller is so much more than the hunter it was originally bred to be. The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA) was founded in 1984 to encourage and promote the selective breeding of Tollers. The club emphasizes hunting ability as well as temperament, conformation and intelligence. Since its founding, the NSDTRC (USA) has grown from a handful of owners to more than 150 members including 15 from Canada and one each from Sweden and Finland. They are involved in obedience work ranging from Novice to Utility, tracking, conformation and field work, including both the licensed field trials of the Canadian Kennel Club and the hunting tests of the North American Hunting Retriever Association and the United

Kennel Club's Hunting Retriever Club.

The NSDTRC (USA) maintains the only registry of Tollers in the U.S. Presently more than 250 Tollers of both American and Canadian breedings are registered.

In the past, most articles written about the breed ended saying that it was a fine dog but without much hope for survival. This was attributed to a limited number of small-scale breeders, limitations on the availability of breeding stock outside Canada and a tendency for Toller puppies to disappear into the hunting or family pet environment. Today, that is simply not true!

The U.S. club has actively promoted the breed and has developed several competitive titles and programs which allow Toller owners to compete in obedience, show, tracking, hunting and field events. Today the club is proud of the nine titled champions, Tollers who have met the club's two-part requirement of earning 15 points in the show ring and passing a retriever aptitude test. Several Tollers have earned obedience titles of Companion Dog and Companion Dog Excellent. Tollers are trying the new agility test program and several have completed the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen certification. The number of Toller Canine Good Citizens is growing rapidly.

Many Toller owners who compete in obedience report that the dog is happiest when working. However, they also report the Toller has its own timetable for learning. It is bright, intelligent and easy to train if you are experienced.

Many people compare Tollers to Golden Retrievers and this is perhaps natural because of the pleasant personality and the coat color. However, they are ardent observers of life and as young dogs they are easily distracted in the ring. At about two years they reach a level of mental and emotional maturity that makes the training process easier. This is not to say that Tollers can't be trained until this maturity arrives, but that while they learn quickly, they also bore quickly. Training sessions must be kept short and light, fun and challenging.

The Toller is also proving to be an excellent participant in a new field of endeavor, pet therapy. Several Tollers have been certified for sound temperament to be used in programs to help people. The Toller works well with mentally retarded children in schools and institutions, with elderly people living in nursing homes, and with long-term patients undergoing treatment for strokes, major trauma or burns in rehabilitation hospitals.

Tollers love affection and a soft pat on the head will make a friend. Their self-control means they can also spend long periods just sitting quietly with a person who needs a friend. As smaller dogs, they can get up on the bed in a nursing home. As retrievers, they can play fetch with wheelchair-bound teen-agers. With really small children, they can play actively but often they just lie on the floor for a quiet visit with their little friends.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is recognized by the States Kennel Club and the United Kennel Club; it is eligible to participate in conformation in both clubs and obedience competitions with UKC only. In addition, the UKC-sponsored Hunting Retriever Club provides a competitive program in the field. Two Tollers have received their Hunting Retriever titles.

Currently the NSDTRC (USA) has a goal of recognition by the American Kennel Club; preliminary meetings with AKC representatives have been promising. In July 1991, the AKC passed a landmark ruling that allows purebred dogs registered in the country of their origin or with a breed registry in the U.S. to participate in AKC-sanctioned matches in both the breed and Novice obedience levels of competition. This will provide an additional way for Toller owners to work

toward NSDTRC (USA) titles, but it also will increase the visibility of the breed in the eyes of judges and dog owners.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever has broken free of the constraints of the hunting technique for which it's named. Today the Toller is multifaceted and thinking of the dog only in terms of this hunting technique does it, and yourself, an injustice.

For more information on Tollers or the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA), please contact Gretchen Botner, secretary, 951 Moon Court, Marco Island, FL 33937; (813) 642-0851.

Gretchen Botner is a secretary and computer fanatic. She and her husband researched 14 breeds, got two Tollers through a DW ad, and became totally involved. In Florida, seagulls and pelicans are big temptations for the four-legged water lovers. ■