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THE NOVA SCOTIA DUCK TOLLING RETRIEVER

A DISTINCTIVE CANADIAN



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WHAT IS A NOVA SCOTIA DUCK TOLLING RETRIEVER?

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, usually called the Toller, began its development in the Little River district of Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia. The most commonly quoted account of the breed's origination is that, in the year 1860, a Mr. James Allen, also of Yarmouth, obtained from the captain of a schooner, a female, liver-coloured, English Flat-Coated retriever to which Allen mated a short-coated Labrador-like retriever. Bitches from the resulting litter were bred to a brown Cocker Spaniel. Very shortly afterward, a crossing with an Irish Setter introduced the fox red colour of today's Toller. It is also possible that breedings with the Collie or Shetland sheepdog was introduced to produce the heavily feathered tail and the herding instincts which the Toller now possesses. Furthermore, the possibility of breedings with the Brittany Spaniel and Golden Retriever at some time can not be ruled out. The idea was to develop a dog that resembled the Red Fox; small, playful and intelligent with the retrieving ability of the large retriever breeds and the hunting instincts inherent in the Sporting Dog Group.

Originally the Toller was called the Little River Duck Dog, due to its place of origin, but through the efforts of Cyril Coldwell of Halifax, the breed was officially registered with the Canadian Kennel Club in 1945, as the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. The breed has gained more recognition in recent years and there are now breeders located across Canada. If the present trend continues, the Toller may well become one of the most popular dogs in Canadian history.

HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

Although basic North American stock was used in the development of the two other breeds with Canadian "names", the Labrador Retriever and the Newfoundland dog were developed and first registered in England where they were influenced by crossing with other breeds before being registered. The Newfoundland dog, which is basically a very old breed, probably originated with the Bear dogs of the ancient Vikings. The Newfoundland was introduced into England in the 1700's where it was crossed with the English Mastiff and possibly the great Pyrenees (from which the white colouring of the Landseer type of Newfoundland dog comes) before being first registered by the English Kennel Club.

The following is a brief history of the other five retriever breeds officially recognised in Canada: The Labrador and Chesapeake Retrievers began their development early in the 1800's. Both were influenced by the Newfoundland dog and the Chesapeake, by a coon hound type dog. When the Labrador of the early 1800's was introduced into England it was crossed with the English Flat-coated Retriever and possibly the Curly-coated Retriever. The Labrador was first registered in 1909 by the English Kennel Club. The Golden Retriever began its development in 1858 with Sir Dudley Majorbanks of England from Russian tracking dog stock or as now believed, from a cross between the Flat-coated Retriever and the Tweed Spaniel. The oldest retrievers, the English Curoly-coat and the Flat-coated Retrievers were officially registered in 1854 and 1860. It is likely that these two breeds influenced the development of all other retriever breeds.

The Toller was not at any stage of its development influenced by breedings in any other country. The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is "The Only Truly Canadian Dog" It was developed in Canada, by Canadians and for Canadian hunting conditions. The ultimate objective would be to have the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever recognized as CANADA'S NATIONAL DOG, to take its rightful place in our Canadian Heritage. As a breed, the Toller is nearly as old as the other popular retriever breeds, such as the Labrador, Chesapeake, and Golden. The Golden, for example, began its development only two years before the Toller. The Labrador began its development only a little earlier in the 1800's. The Toller was not more popular in the past probably because of restrictive distribution practices of the original and most of the subsequent breeders who did not usually allow females to leave their kennels. The main breeders were avid duck hunters who did not want competition in the lakes or on the marshes.

CHARACTERISTICS

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is an exceptionally intelligent dog and very easy to train. Both the sire and dam of one of my breeding females are Obedience Trial Champions. "Red", one of my champion stud dogs, which was the top Toller in Canada for 1970, retrieved his first duck at twelve weeks of age. The duck was a big Black, almost as large as the dog himself, but he managed to drag it across a field and set it in front of me vigorously wagging his tail. I used Red as a flushing type dog for woodcock, pheasant and partridge, as well as a toller and retriever for duck hunting. I do not believe the Toller has any rival as an all-purpose hunting dog, particularly under Canadian hunting conditions. The Toller will go after a downed duck under conditions of ice and heavy seas, with courage and determination that is not less than astonishing. A great advantage in using a Toller as a hunting dog, particularly a retriever, is its compact size. The Toller is the smallest of all retrievers. All the other retrievers weigh better than 65 pounds and average over 22 inches at the shoulder. Tollers average about 50 pounds (for males) and stand about 20 inches tall at the shoulder. They are more agile, stronger pound for pound, and have more determination and courage than any breed I know. Tollers are ideal apartment size hunting dogs, easily fitting into a gunning hole or duck blind. They are not likely to get in the way or knock things over (including children) in the smallest apartment, yet they are strong and courageous enough to fight heavy seas or ice to reach a downed duck. The Toller, of course, is not limited to being a hunting companion. These dogs have a typical Nova Scotian personality. They are extremely gentle, friendly, faithful companions, and alert watch dogs. They are even used occasionally as herding dogs for cattle or sheep. Because of their innate playful nature and tendency not to roam, they also make unsurpassed playmates for children, and although they are excellent, alert, watch dogs, I have NEVER seen a Toller that was cross or ugly.

One of the Tollers characteristics that I find quite outstanding is the breeds innate retrieving ability. Almost any Toller pup of eight or nine weeks only, chosen at random out of any litter, will immediately show a desire to retrieve any small object thrown for it. I have seen many Tollers that have mastered retrieving as well as the come, sit, stay, lay-down, no, out, etc commands at twelve to fourteen weeks of age. They seem to have an amazing ability to learn at a very early age and early training improves the dogs overall adult behaviours and temperament.

Like ANY breed of dog, there are of course, those few specimens that do not do exactly what they are supposed to. They may be gun shy, they may lack an attraction for water, or they may not have the desired playful nature. These traits, however, are not necessarily due to the dogs inherited characteristics, but rather due to its own particular development as an individual. I have seen Labradors that would not go near water and Beagles that were afraid of the scent of rabbit. Many of these problems are the result of the particular dog's experiences, probably as a very young puppy. When Red was only 14 to 16 weeks old I had him at the edge of a pond where I train my dogs for the water. Red had not yet been in the water. I threw a stick for him to retrieve, and he slid off a rock and went completely under the surface of the water. Although he is my best hunting Toller, he has never had an enthusiastic drive to go in the water. I am sure that this is a result of his early experience at the pond, because his ancestors and offspring have been excellent water dogs. Most of the undesirable traits like gun shyness and lack of attraction for the water can be remedied through careful training. But the best method is careful treatment and training when the dog is young. Because dogs can be adversely influenced psychologically just as easily as humans, attention should be given to their emotional development as well as the more straightforward training potential.

WHAT IS DUCK TOLLING?

The most important and unique feature of the Toller is that it tolls ducks. What does this mean? The idea of using a dog to toll, decoy, or attract ducks comes from the relationship between ducks and the Red Fox, which the Toller was bred to resemble. The idea was not new, as tolling dogs of no particular breed were used in Europe, possibly as far back as 1625, to lure waterfowl into large nets. (The word Tolling, as it is used in Nova Scotia Duck "Tolling" Retriever, means to draw or entice—from the Middle English word "Tollen". The modern English definition is, of course, the stroke of a bell—Oxford). Interest in the idea of a Tolling dog in Nova Scotia probably came from the Acadians or the Micmac Indians of the area who are believed to have had a fox-like dog which they used to catch or net ducks.

How does a fox (or Tolling dog) work? When ducks see a fox playing on the shore of a lake or other body of water, they will approach him much like a swallow approaches a crow, or a crow approaches an owl. Whether they do this to tease or drive off, it is not known, but they will sometimes approach from great distances off in the water, and even from the air, as long as the fox is visible. They will come with their heads erect or stretched, hissing like an old gander around the farmyard. Ducks will toll on a perfectly fine day as well as on the most foul of days.

The logical explanation of the attraction of duck to fox (or Tolling dog) is the fact the fox is a natural enemy of the duck, because they steal their eggs and kill young ducklings. The fox seems to be aware of this attraction and uses it to his advantage as ducks will sometimes come close enough to be caught, providing the fox with a good meal. Sometimes two foxes will work together, one playing on the shore, the other hiding in the grass. When the ducks approach, the fox hiding in the grass will leap out and catch one of the ducks and the two foxes will share the meal. Walt Disney Productions have made a movie about the Red Fox which includes the filming of this phenomenon.

When in action, the Tolling dog makes no sound, and unlike the fox does not try to catch the ducks, or does not go into the water. It is simply his presence and playful movements that attract the ducks. The hunter will set up in a blind or hide in the grass on the shore of a lake, river or tidal marsh. If there are ducks far out in the water, out of shotgun range, the hunter will allow his Toller, which is at all times under his control, to play along the edge and by doing so the ducks will be attracted within shooting range. The hunter does NOT, of course, shoot the ducks while they are in the water, but when they are in range, he will stand or somehow cause the ducks to fly thus making them move vulnerable targets and lessening the chance of losing wounded or crippled ducks. When the shooting is over the hunter's Toller then acts in his second capacity, as a retriever, and an able and courageous retriever he is. I know of 1 40 pound Toller bitch that retrieved seven Canada geese from fairly rough seas, with her face and mouth covered with porcupine quills.

NO SPECIAL TRAINING REQUIRED

No special training is required to teach the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever to toll ducks. The only thing required is that the dog be taught to retrieve. This can be accomplished by any of the standard procedures used to teach retrieving. However, the Toller is a natural retriever and very little training is normally required. When the hunter wants to toll ducks he simply places himself and his Toller where they can not be seen by the ducks. Then the hunter will throw a "small" stick or other object for the Toller to retrieve. (Preferably not rocks. I sometimes use empty shot gun shells). The object must be thrown in a location so that the ducks can see the dog while it is retrieving. When the dog goes to retrieve the object he may not do so immediately, but will play with the stick, toss it up in the air, roll on it, chew it, all in full view of the ducks which are off in the water. On seeing this, the ducks will normally begin to come in towards the dog. In a short time, the dog will finally pick up the stick and bring it back to his master's hand. His master will keep him in the blind until the ducks stop their movement in his direction. At this point he will throw the stick out again and the same process is repeated. This procedure is continued until the ducks are within shotgun range. At this point, the dog is made to stay in the blind until the shooting is over and he is instructed to retrieve any ducks that were downed. The use of a Tolling dog obviously eliminates the necessity of always carrying about dozens of decoy ducks which most duck hunters normally use.

One thing to remember is that although the Toller is a natural retriever and has a naturally playful nature, it also has natural hunting instincts. In other words, it must be taught not to chase or try to catch the ducks. One method used to teach the dog to ignore the ducks is by tying a light piece of string or mainline cord to his collar while the dog is being used to toll. The string must be long enough to reach from the place where the dog is tolling to the hiding hunter. In this way, when the dog becomes interested in the ducks, a simple jerk on the string will bring him under control and he will retrieve the stick or object as he is supposed to. I have seen many experienced Tolling dogs playing and retrieving sticks with ducks only a few feet away. These dogs never attempted to catch the ducks.

Probably one of the most important features of hunting with a Tolling dog is the fact that it can be used successfully in fine weather. This is particularly significant in locations where most duck hunting is done in foul weather using decoy ducks or fly past shooting. Ducks have been known to come into a Tolling dog from over a mile away. It is a fantastic experience for a hunter to see a raft of thousands of ducks coming to his Tolling dog and into shotgun range. Geese and most species of ducks (with the exception of sea ducks like the Ider, Old Squaw, and Scooter), can be tolled with a Tolling dog. Black ducks, Mallards, Teal, and Bluebills (scaup) are easy to toll. Geese are more difficult to toll than ducks.

I would encourage anyone, particularly those who use the larger retriever breeds, to try using a well-trained Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever for hunting. Many of you have used only one breed and because you have liked that breed, do not try another. Ask anyone that has owned a Toller, as well as other breeds of dogs, hunting and non-hunting. I believe you will find the great majority would not now have any other breed. Their Toller has captured their hearts, both as a breed and as a dog. Kind, gentle, affectionate, and alert describes the Toller as a pet. Intelligent, willing, able and determined, describes the Toller as a hunting dog. What more can you ask?



TO ALL WHO ARE PRESENTLY DOG BREEDERS

Why did you become dog breeders? Was it because you liked the breed with which it began? Was it to make money? How about challenge? Was it simply a challenge to successfully produce your first litter of pups and watch them grow? All or none of these may be true of you as a breeder. In any case, I would like to suggest that there is probably no breed in Canada today that has the potential for development and challenge as the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. This is particularly true for Canadians. There are very few breeders, and much development yet to be done. Uniformity in conformation and colour is a challenge in itself with the Toller. Developing an interest in our only truly native dog presents a challenge that can not be produced in any other breed. Knowing that you are one of a few, promoting something Canadian, preserving a part of our heritage, leads to a certain sense of greater national pride. Think about that. Are you as a breeder prepared to meet the challenge that is offered through the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, the Only Truly Canadian Dog?

Photographs and Dogs by LITTLE RIVER KENNELS

