



PHOTO COURTESY CKC/ALISON STRANG

THE NOVA SCOTIA DUCK TOLLING RETRIEVER

The clever manner in which foxes work together to obtain a duck dinner has been observed over the centuries. While one of a pair conceals itself near the waterline, the other fox leaps and cavorts about on the shore swishing his magnificent tail. The rafts of ducks out on the water soon become curious and move in closer... and closer, to see what all the commotion is. Soon, some are close enough to be caught by the undercover partner. Indians utilized this mesmerizing practice by stringing a fox skin across a length of shore and yanking it quickly back and forth, simulating the movement of the fox.

Dogs have been taught to draw ducks towards the hunter in the style of the fox. This process is called 'tolling,' from the Old English *tollen*, to entice. Tolling dogs were utilized by the MicMac Indians for many centuries and the Kooikerhondje are still used in Europe. For more than a hundred years, in the Little River district of Yarmouth County in southwest Nova Scotia, hunters have used similar tolling dogs.

These dogs were the result of various retriever crosses, felt to be Golden, Chesapeake, Labrador and Flat-coat, with speculation of a dash of Cocker, Irish Setter (for its beautiful red coat) and various small farm collies and/or playful spitz-like dogs. This resulted in a medium-sized dog, about 37-51 lb., 17-21", with a close, thick, moderately long coat of deep golden to dark coppery red.

Their unique hunting style has been fixed for a century, but a formal registration and written Standard is of very recent date (1945). The breed used to be called The Little River Duck Dog or the Yarmouth Toller, but when The Canadian Kennel Club recognized and began registering them in 1945, the present name was decreed. The Federation Cynologique International (FCI) gave them full international recognition in 1982.

The Toller's unconventional style of hunting begins with the hunter concealed in a blind near the shore. A small stick or other retrieving item is tossed parallel to

the shore. The dog rushes out with tremendous animation, twirling and prancing as he retrieves the object and returns to the blind, tail wagging at all times. Some Tollers show their enthusiasm vocally as they fetch, but this is strongly discouraged. The object is thrown again and again. Sometimes the ducks are immediately curious; other times they may watch the dog make 50 retrieves. The dogs must maintain the animation and eagerness for as long as it takes to draw the fowl. Sooner or later, ducks and geese become curious and move nearer, often hissing and beating the water with their wings as they approach the shore.

The properly trained tolling dog never breaks concentration to peer at the ducks as they inch closer, but continues his 'game.' When the ducks are within range, the hunter calls the dog back into the blind, stands up to put the ducks to flight and then shoots. After the shot, the Toller dons his other hat — that of a fine, natural retriever.

Hunting with a Toller means being able to come home with a full game bag, even on those sunny, 'blue bird' days that are notoriously poor for waterfowl hunting. A small 30-lb. bitch is credited with retrieving a Canada Goose (no small trophy) from the Atlantic Ocean during a storm. Another retrieved several of these geese, despite a face full of porcupine quills. Tales such as these are common among breed fanciers.

Tollers are like other retrievers in that they are companionable and easy to train, but as dogs of high energy, they need a great deal of exercise. As long as an outlet is found to satisfy that need, the Toller makes a fine house dog.

More and more owners are finding that obedience is another talent. His strong retrieving desire and playfulness are natural traits, both necessary for his tolling ability. Tolling is also a natural trait (like pointing) and cannot be taught. They have an intense, natural excitement about their duty. Young dogs need to practise, but training sessions involve making a pet of them and having children throw sticks for them to retrieve.

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Nova Scotians still refer to working a tolling dog as 'playing' the dog. One owner says, "Tollers are retrieving fools. If anyone ever makes the mistake of throwing a ball for them, they will keep the unfortunate soul throwing until his arm gives out."

The breed is sensible and devoted to its family. The Toller may be a bit more reserved to non-family than

the Golden Retriever. The coat requires the same care as other retrievers. Some Tollers have very little white, while others evidence the Irish pattern, even to a large facial blaze. The white tip of the tail is highly prized since it can be seen from a distance by the fowl, much like the white tip on Reynard's tail!