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The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever

by Colleen Archer

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is a hunting dog developed in Canada by Canadians, yet even in Canada it remains virtually unknown to a public that can identify a poodle or a collie at first glance. The main reason for this is that Tollers were found primarily in one location for

over a century. Only since the 1960's have they been bred in any significant numbers in the rest of Canada and exported to the United States.

The Toller was developed in the Little River district of Yarmouth County on the southwestern tip of Nova Scotia in the 19th century. The

aim of the breeders, so the story goes, was to develop a hunting dog resembling the red fox. The red fox often plays on the shore of a lake or other body of water, tolling or luring curious ducks to shore to be pounced on by a hidden companion.

While nondescript tolling dogs had long been used in Europe to lure waterfowl into nets (the word *toll* means to draw or entice, from the Middle English word *tollen*), the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever was developed to both toll and retrieve. He runs, jumps, and plays along the shoreline, encouraged by a hidden hunter who may throw small sticks or a ball. The dog's actions arouse the curiosity of the ducks and they're lured within gunshot range and put to wing. The Toller then retrieves the dead or wounded birds.

Back in 1943, outdoor writer Ward Thorne gave a graphic description of a Toller at work in *Canadian Dogs* magazine. The breed was then known as the Little River Duck Dog, and Mr. Thorne went with breeder Rodney Hemeon, Town Clerk and Treasurer of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, on a hunting expedition to the haunt of the black duck. Wrote Thorne:

"Rodney saw ducks, and his dogs were going to bring those ducks to the gun or he'd know the reason why. So, taking a smooth stick, he tossed it out on the shore and motioned the pup to get busy — and get busy he did. He played with the stick, tossing it in the air, and catching it, grovelling on the ground with it, in fact doing all sorts of stunts. I could see he was conscious of the ducks on the water but he made not a sound. It was a fine exhibition for a young dog to make.

"Shortly the ducks began to move slowly toward the shore. First a couple of birds put their heads up and started towards us. Then more of them became interested and grad-



The Toller was developed to both "toll" and retrieve. He runs, jumps, and plays along the shoreline, arousing the curiosity of ducks and luring them into range.

Photo by Colleen Archer

usually the whole flock seemed to be moving our way in wedge formation, with the apex pointing towards the blind. It may have been an illusion, but the speed seemed to increase as the flock drew nearer to us. In a few minutes they were within gunshot and now came the real test of the dog's steadiness. A wrong movement would have put those quackers in the air at any second and any hopes of a good shot would be destroyed. Rodney had done his work thoroughly, however, and his little red dog gave a fine exhibition of what breeding and training will do for a dog."

There are many stories as to the actual origin of the remarkable Toller, one being that Micmac Indians developed the breed. Another is that in 1860, one James Allen of Yarmouth obtained from the captain of a schooner a female liver-colored English flat-coated retriever to which he mated a short-coated Labrador-type dog. Bitches from the litter were then bred to a brown cocker spaniel. Soon afterwards, other breeds were introduced, including the Irish setter (which gave the Toller its red coat), the little yellow farm collies of the area (which would explain the Toller's heavily feathered tail and herding instincts), and possibly the Brittany, the golden retriever, and various playful spitz-type dogs.

The Little River duck dog was recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club in 1945 and given the name Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. Fifteen dogs were initially registered, and then a lapse of 14 years occurred which necessitated re-registration. Hettie Bidewell of Chin Peek Kennels in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan began the move for re-registration after buying a pair of Tollers in the mid-1950's from Yarmouth breeder Fred Armstrong.

Avery Nickerson and Eldon Pace were the two main Nova Scotia breeders at that time, and Avery Nickerson's Harbour Lights Kennels is still going strong. Mr. Nickerson has an excellent hunting line developed over 35 years, and he is considered to be the leading authority on the art of tolling ducks with a dog.

The groundwork laid by Mr. Nickerson, Mr. Pace, and Mrs. Bidewell was built on by Nova Scotia breeders John and Mary Sproul at



A double brace of Tollers awaits instruction in beautiful British Columbia.

Photo by Joe Andrews

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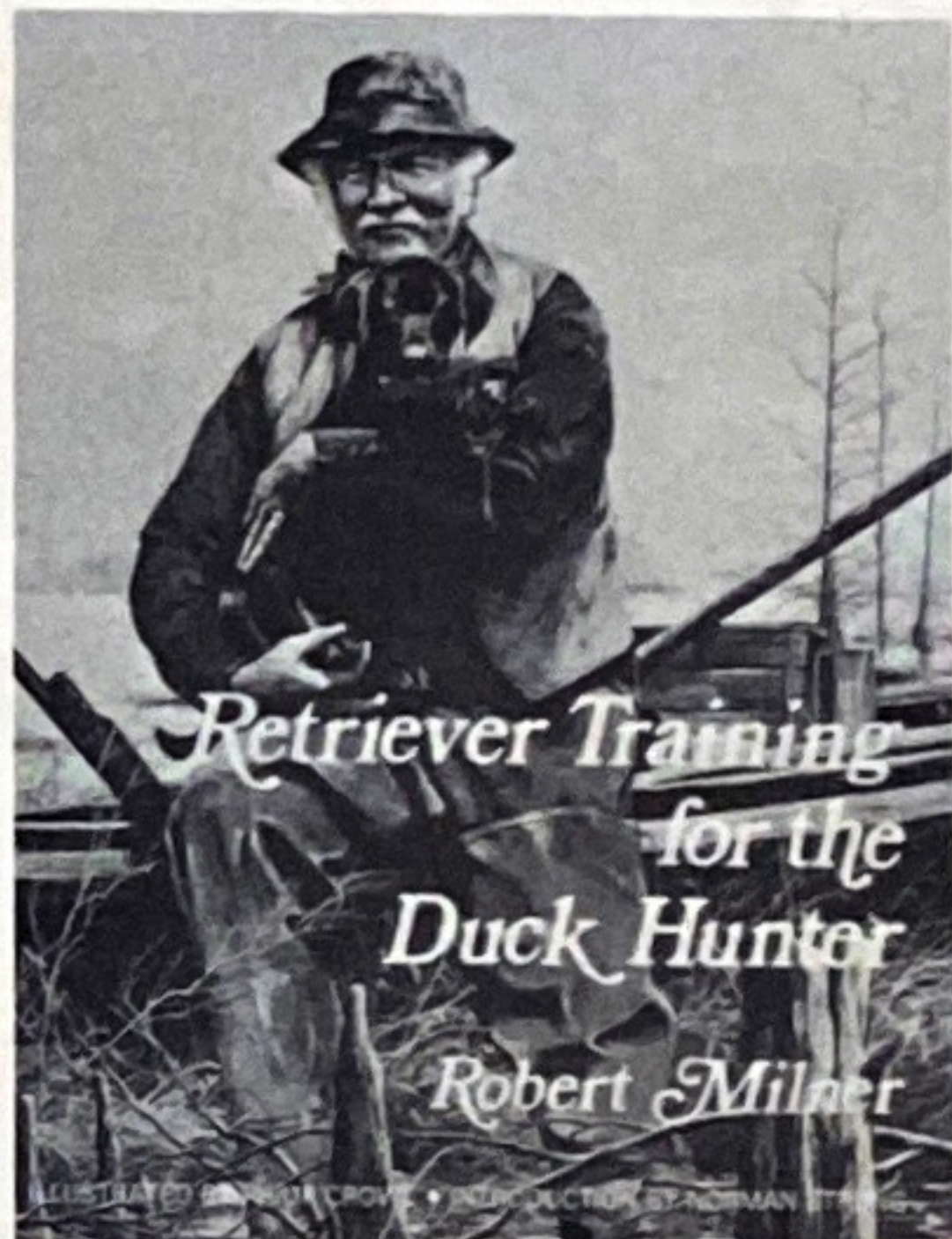
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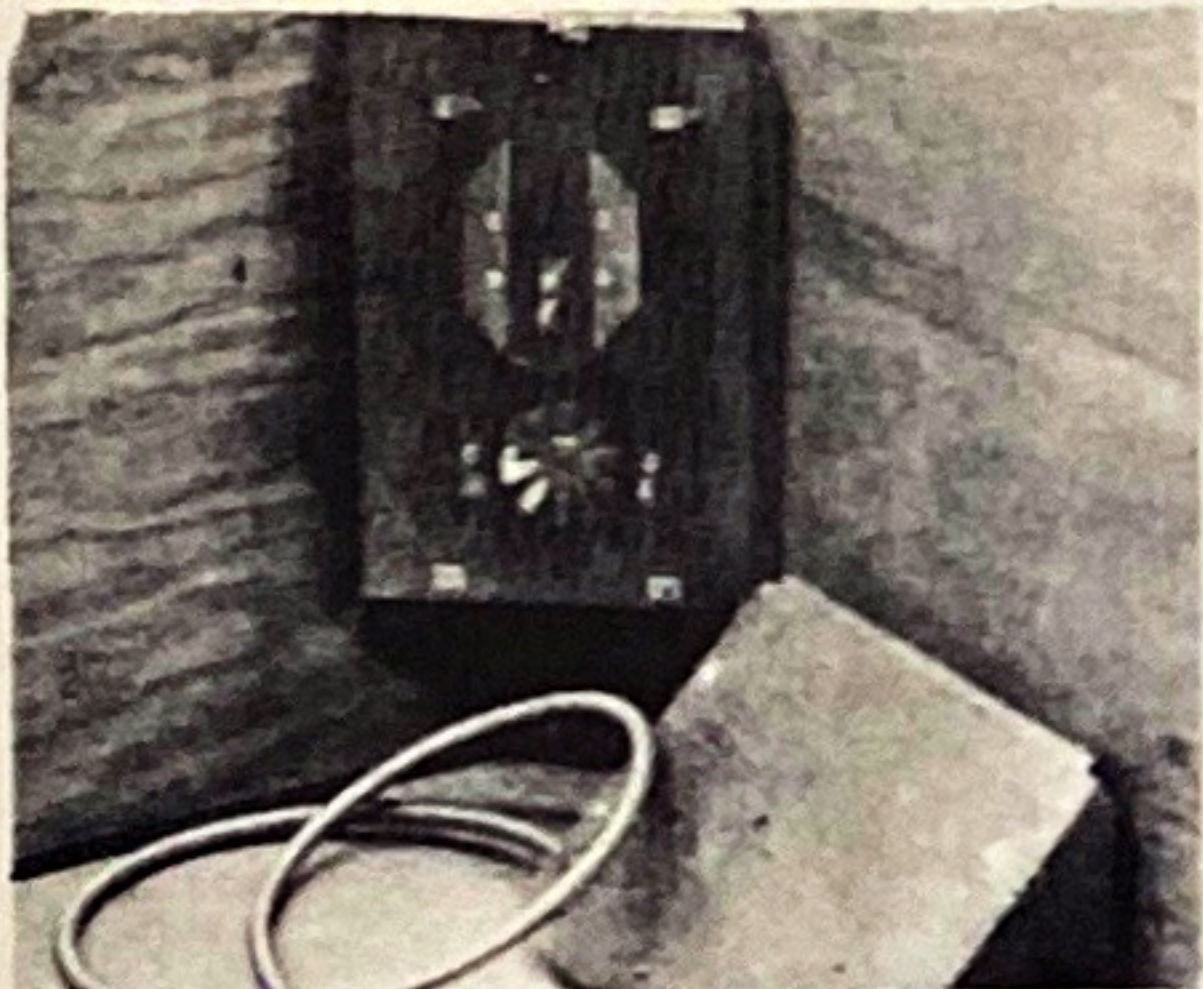


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their Springhill Kennels, and by Jim Jeffery and his brother-in-law Doug Coldwell of Little River Kennels. Tollers of the Sproul and Jeffery-Coldwell lines are now found across the country and in the United States as well, although the breed is not yet recognized by an official American body.

The main challenge facing today's breeders is to standardize the breed while preventing the show/hunting split which has plagued so many other sporting breeds. Today's Toller should be around the 20-inch and 50-to 55-pound marks. The preferred color is coppery-red, like a fox. Most Tollers have some white on their chest and belly, and they can also have a white blaze on their foreheads and white on their toes and the tips of their tails.

Tollers should be powerful, well-muscled, and speedy. They should have a rushing action, with the head carried out almost level with the back and the fox-like tail in constant motion. Since they were bred to retrieve from icy waters, their coats must be water repellent, of medium length, with soft, dense undercoats.

Contributing to this description was one of the Toller's biggest boosters, Alison Strang of Surrey, British Columbia. Mrs. Strang calls the Toller, "Canada's own all-round dog." She is the editor of *Toller Talk*, the quarterly publication of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club of Canada.

Mrs. Strang was introduced to Tollers when she moved to the Canadian Maritimes from Rhodesia in the 1960's. In 1975, she bought her first Toller, "Shelley," from James Jeffrey who at that time was living in Ottawa, Ontario. The Strangs moved to Vancouver in 1976, and Mrs. Strang started her Westerlea Kennels. She now has five adult Tollers and two to three litters per year.

"Tollers are retrieving fools," says Mrs. Strang. "If anyone ever makes the mistake of throwing a ball for them, they will keep the unfortunate soul throwing until his arm gives out. Water presents no problems. Shelley regularly outswam our Newfoundland when she was only four months old, so fierce was her desire to be first at the retrieve. Her son, my home-bred Best in Show male Champion, "Westerlea's White Ensign (Tip),"

goes his mother one better. He will climb a tree to retrieve a stick or boat bumper.

"Few people out here try to hunt using the Maritime 'tolling' method, but I have had many reports of the dogs tolling in ducks naturally. One of my pups was owned by well-known Kwakiutl artist Doug Cranmer of Alert Bay, and she regularly tolled in ducks for him, never missing a retrieve."

Several Toller owners across Canada are now entering their dogs in field trials. While such competitions help demonstrate the retrieving



**Westerlea
Nova Scotia Duck Tollers**

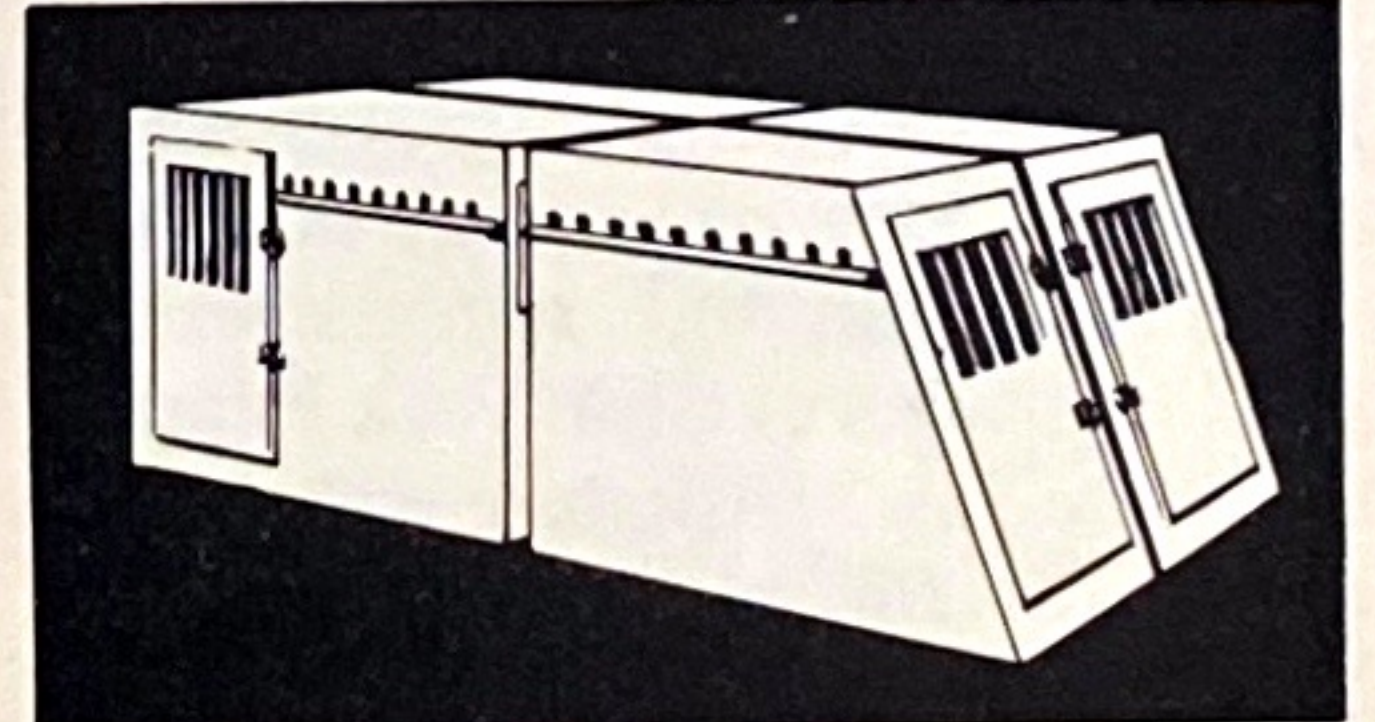
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A pair of young Tollers demonstrates their love of water and natural retrieving instincts.

Photo by Gary Parker

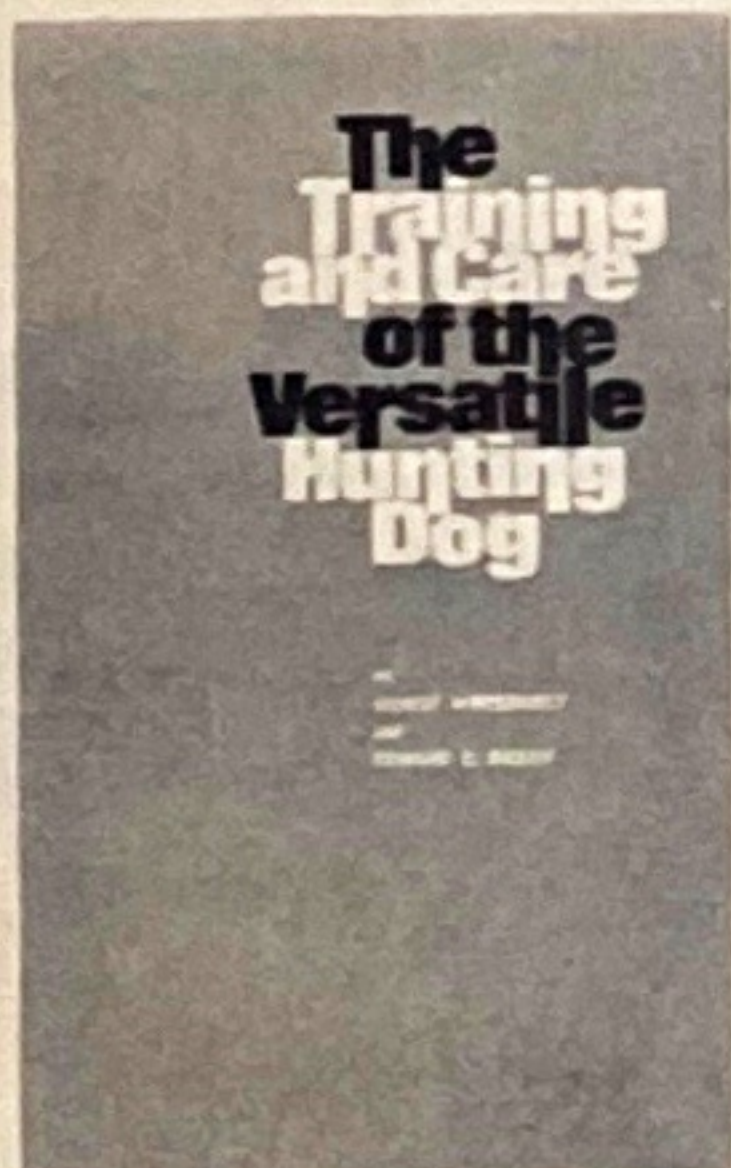
ability of the breed to the general public, there's no need for the Toller to prove himself in southwestern Nova Scotia. As James Jeffery writes in *Toller Talk*:

"There was never any question in Yarmouth County as to the Toller's retrieving ability. I could have easily had a Chessie, which I have always admired for their strength, or a Labrador. However, it was common knowledge around Yarmouth that the Toller was a superior hunting dog, period. Anyone who knew anything at all about duck hunting used one — not always their own. This may have been due to some degree to the geography of the area, as it is ideal for duck tolling with a dog. However, since the dogs were also used for retrieving and without criticism as such, one can only assume that the hunters using them were satisfied." □

Colleen Archer is a member of the Periodical Writers Association of Canada and has published 100 articles and stories in Canada and the United States.

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