

# ANNUAL PUPPY SPECTACULAR

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# GUNDOG<sup>®</sup>

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Canada's Duck Dog

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# THE PURELY

Beaut (Layline's Beautiful Swimmer CH WCX), bred by Francine Kaplan and owned by Jeff Tinsman.

The Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever is a lot of dog in a medium-sized package.

BY M.J. NELSON



A lovely, patriotic song sung now and then by our neighbors north of the border is “The Maple Leaf Forever.” In one of the three verses of this song is the phrase “Our fair Dominion.” In law, “dominion” means absolute ownership. The only sporting breed over which Canada has dominion, in keeping with the word’s legal meaning, is the Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever (NSDTR).



Taylor (GCh White Diamond Beekauz WC CD RA), owned by Dan and Sharon Kauzlarich .

# CANADIAN HUNTING DOG

That assertion might create howls of protest from some Labrador lovers. But their howling will be in vain because, despite its name, the Labrador retriever is actually an English breed, not Canadian. Yes, one of its ancestors came from Canada as the Labrador breed stems, as do most retriever breeds, from the now extinct St. John's water dog. But it wasn't until the St. John's water dog was exported to England and crossed with other breeds that the Labrador retriever emerged. So that makes the

toller the only true Canadian sporting dog. The breed is also unique in that it performs an unusual function for waterfowl hunters—tolling.

The early waterfowl hunters in Nova Scotia had a problem. The massive rafts of canvasbacks, redheads and bluebills tended to sit far out in the lakes and large marshes of the province, well out of range of the hunters' guns. The birds' choice of resting areas made it difficult to creep up on them even with a sneak box boat. But the hunters observed

that native red foxes were frequently able to lure the birds close enough to the shore to be ambushed.

The fox would dance, prance and wag its bushy, white-tipped tail as it bounced along the shoreline. This action would arouse the birds' curiosity so they would swim to shore to see what was making the fuss. Since a wild fox is virtually impossible to train, the solution for the waterfowl hunters was to develop a dog that would mimic the fox in size, coloration and antics.

## PURELY CANADIAN

The result was the toller, although other than the St. John's water dog and quite likely the Dutch tolling kooiker hondje, there is no definitive answer as to how they went about developing the breed.

The tolling trait persists in the modern NSDTR and some owners still utilize that ability in certain circumstances. "I haven't been able to do it for several years as you need rafting ducks and cover to hide in," said Dan Kauzlarich. "My waterfowl hunting these days is mainly from a blind which doesn't lend itself to tolling. But in the past we would sneak up along lakes and toll the ducks and geese into gun range. If you can find the right conditions, it does work. The dogs certainly have fun doing it."

"Tolling is the only solution for a raft of ducks in bluebird weather," said Francine Kaplan. "But the guys who taught me how to hunt waterfowl on the Barnegat [Inlet in New Jersey] did not see the wisdom of tolling. We had a lot of missed shooting opportunities when my toller was finally allowed to run free during potty breaks for the hunters.

"While my personal preference now is to hunt upland birds with my tollers, they have exquisite noses and can track



Bronson (GCh [gold] Water's Edge Mr. Majestyk CD BN RN NA OAJ WCI VCX), owned by Dan Rode.

readily over both land and water. I've never lost a downed bird with my dogs. What I like best hunting upland birds with a toller is that they give you lots of warning before they flush a bird.

"I call it 'the bird dance' but it's probably just their tolling instincts surfac-

ing as they will circle and tease, then flush the bird. I do know that tollers require positive training methods until they have mastered the basic skills. They also require their trainers to have a strong sense of humor and a good deal of humility."



Rion (Ch MACH Aqueus Galaxy of Stars 2 Orion RN MH MXB MJS NF), owned by Kathy Gibson.

While the breed has sometimes been said to be difficult to train, that has not been Dan Rode's experience. "I've owned several Labradors and I haven't found tollers to be any tougher to train than the Labs, just different," he noted. "Tollers learn differently than do Labs and you have to treat each toller as an individual. I keep an open mind to trying different techniques with each dog and I try to be creative in my training.

"While some might say tollers are soft, I've found they can handle pressure if it is used properly and in a fair manner. I think some feel that a soft dog can't handle any pressure and as a result, they will avoid using some common training techniques. However, I've found that my tollers have handled what pressure I have used just fine."

"You can't train them like a Labrador," said John Simonson. "Too many people try pushing a toller without properly teaching them what you want. This leads to a dog getting sour, especially if corrections are given unfairly. They're really quite smart and they respond well to being taught what you are asking them to do.

"Our dogs have all been collar conditioned and they've responded well to corrections but again, it's all about a fair correction under proper circumstances. Tollers trust you and losing that trust will definitely inhibit your ability to become a partner with your dog. Most tollers are fairly soft although some can be really hard headed.

"Our Mango tended to be hard headed when it came to marking multiple birds or in taking directions from us when she was sent for a retrieve. She was difficult to handle or pull off the first bird shot and key onto the second bird. She was great at retrieving the first bird but handling with her was a challenge."

"They're not as easy to train as Labs but they are good learners if you use positive training techniques," said Kauzlarich. "They are thinking dogs that can turn off if you try to train them like some Lab people train their dogs. They can be collar trained but with the understanding that some tollers may take very little stimulation to respond.

"They're really all around gun dogs as they are comfortable in the marsh, in a blind or in the field. They are quite strong swimmers and can stand cold water. They



Ning (GCh Water's Edge What Does The Fox Say JH RN WC FDX), owned by Dan Rode.

also have the endurance and hunting instincts to be a good upland dog.

"But if a person wants a 'robot' dog, a toller may not work for them as they take a skilled hand to train to the upper senior or master levels of the hunt tests. You can't force a toller to do something but rather you have to negotiate with them. They must be handled with a firm, fair hand."

While the breed was not designed to be a "heavy duty hunter" such as, for instance, the Chesapeake Bay retriever, Kathy Gibson and John and Marie Simonson have proof that tollers can handle long and difficult retrieves as both have achieved master hunter titles with their dogs. "Not all tollers like birds but the majority love to retrieve," said Gibson. "However, many tollers, unlike most of the other retriever breeds, don't instinctively hold good lines to marks. Most have to be taught to take lines.

"That's not to say they aren't good markers because they are but they don't always take the straightest line to the bird. I'm also not sure that a toller can handle pressure as well as a Lab even though I have two master hunters. In my opinion, the pressure required at the upper levels of training that are necessary for success in field trials would be too much for some tollers and could result in the dog shutting down, creeping on the line, freezing on birds or standing over birds."

The breed does have one very unusual quirk. When they get excited or frustrated, many tollers will emit a loud, high pitched scream that's unlike any noise produced by the other sporting breeds. It is indeed an odd characteristic and one which prospective owners should probably consider when making their decision on whether this is the breed for them, according to Kauzlarich.

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“They can be noisy at times with the noise ranging all the way from the ‘toller scream’ to just being whiney,” he said. “I had one several years ago that we could never take duck hunting because whenever we’d start calling ducks, he would get really excited and start barking.”

“Not all tollers scream but enough of them do so you have to be very concerned about any vocalizations they make as puppies,” Gibson said. “In times of extreme excitement or frustration, some tollers will emit a high pitched noise that can curdle your blood!”

Tollers are also not particularly good kennel dogs, according to Simonson. “There may be some tollers that are able to survive life as a kennel dog but they really are house dogs and I think you build a much better relationship with them if they become a family member. Our dogs get time on the couches, our bed and they travel with us to the local stores. They want to be with you and go where you go.”

Kaplan agreed. “Tollers are much

better as house/family dogs. Although they give the impression of being aloof, they are really bonded to people and are most comfortable when they are part of the family. However, having said that, my dogs have spent extended periods of time with professional trainers in large kennels but when they are kenneled, I pay to have them walked instead of being thrown into a play group as the ever changing pack hierarchy of a play group tends to confuse a toller.”

“I have a unique situation, having both a boarding kennel and training facility on my property,” said Rode. “Some of my tollers are full time house dogs while the others take turns between the house and the kennel. One thing I would say, however, is that a toller would not be a good dog for someone who just wants a couch potato lapdog.

“I’ve heard more than one toller owner say how intensely active their dogs are and I agree they have a lot of drive and desire. But that doesn’t mean that they can’t also chill and hang out

with you on Sunday afternoon while you watch football.”

This is quite a rare breed so finding a Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever can be a challenge. The demand for pups always exceeds the supply.

“We’re fortunate in that we have a very strong national breed club with lots of resources,” said Kaplan. “You can obtain a copy of the breeder referral directory from the national club website. Then talk to as many breeders as you can.

“Be patient and persistent. Toller breeders are often overwhelmed by the number of inquiries they get. Get on as many waiting lists as you can and tell breeders whose lists you are on so they can work together to find you a puppy.

“Go meet toller owners at a supported entry dog show or better yet, volunteer to throw some birds at a hunt test where some tollers are entered. In that way, you’ll be better able to determine whether a toller is the breed for you.” ★

Winston (Ch CAN OTCH Kilcreek’s  
Sir Winston UDX OM1 MH WCX),  
owned by John and Marie Simonson.

