

Canada's Unique Toller

Travelling last August all the way down the south shore of Nova Scotia's Atlantic coast, we met fishermen and gunners who owned, had owned, or knew someone who had a "Little River Duck Dog". Most people kept them as pets but my wife and I talked to several men who used their dogs for duckin'. But it wasn't until we passed, Gunning Cove, went around Cape Sable and beyond Pubnico to Comeau Hill and Little River Harbour that we could truly say we were in the Canadian ancestral home of the "Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever." For there among the over 300 Tusket Islands and their mud flats are the great tidal marshes and generous feed for the once tens of thousands of black ducks, teal, Canada geese and bluebills which visit the tip of Yarmouth County Nova Scotia. The birds still feed on the saltings and flight back to the hundreds of fresh water lakes to rest in mid-day, preening washing and sunning themselves on rocky points. In the old days over on Randalls Lake, Dick Crowell shot hundreds of birds in front of his tollers in the years after he quit lobster fishing and went home to Argyle Head to train and hunt his dogs. And in 1945 down at Little River Harbour Eddie Kenny who had a yard full of "Little River Duck Dogs" was asked where the breed came from and replied, "Damn I don't know, my grandfather had them when I was a kid". Eddie was an old man then and he sold Avery Nickerson his first toller and Avery has owned them ever since. His "Harbour Light Kennel" is only seven miles from Little River and just a few more from the Argyles and the Tusket which Avery calls "the prettiest area in the whole world." It was there among the islands and back in the fresh water lakes that Dick Crowell taught Avery Nickerson the fine points of working a toller. He was an apt pupil and is without doubt the best known exponent of the skill in Nova Scotia.

"The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever" is a 30 to 50 pound com-



A Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever. A unique Canadian gun dog.

Photo courtesy of Avery Nickerson

pact red dog with a great plumed brush not unlike the red fox. He usually has a white blaze on his face and white markings on his feet, the tip of his tail and his chest. The toller is sensitive and alert to his masters wishes and responds readily to training. Unique to the breed is the tolling function and hunters using a toller conceal themselves in a blind close to the shore in a location visible to ducks on the water. Rafted ducks or geese are ordinarily inaccessible and are simply content to rest and paddle about, hundreds of yards offshore. In full view of the birds the toller is sent out from the blind to retrieve a corn cob size stick from a distance of 20 to 30 feet. The retrieve is done parallel to the shore and repeated several times and soon the curiosity of the waterfowl brings them on their way swimming towards the dog. At this point the dog handler suspends the tolling process by keeping the dog in the blind until the birds become hesitant in their forward progress. Then another toll is repeated. It is quite possible to entice birds from a distance of several hundred yards to within several yards of the blind. Up and down the south shore of Nova Scotia hunters talked to us about

flocks that literally leapfrogged one another in their drive to get near the toller. Avery Nickerson follows the previous advice of Dick Crowell "when the birds are coming in bring in all you can" and says that he has had ducks walk right up on shore. Under no circumstances does the dog pay any attention to the birds but his eyes and consciousness remain riveted on his master and the stick. At the shot, the dog is in the blind and is sent to retrieve on command.

It is claimed that the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is as able an upland game flushing dog as any, and Avery Nickerson affirms the belief that the toller is an all around dog. He uses his on woodcock and grouse. In some of the literature on the breed remarkable claims are made as to the dogs retrieving courage in icy ocean water. People who own tollers are great boosters of their breed as were some of the early breed fanciers, Crowell, Doc Anthony, Fred Armstrong, Eddy Balune and Vince Pothier.

In 1945 the first of the breed was registered with the Canadian Kennel Club, 15 dogs were recorded but in the next fourteen years none was registered. Finally, Avery Nickerson, Eldon Pace of Shubenacadie NS and Hettie Bidewell of Saskatchewan combined forces to re-register the breed and the rest is recent history; more owners, breeders, kennels, show champions, and publicity. But there is less tolling, and after forty years of devotion to the Nova Scotia Duck Toller Avery Nickerson is worried that the breed will become a show dog, and in due course lose much of its strong tolling and retrieving instinct. After all, this is what has happened to many other purebred breeds and the appealing nature and pleasant appearance of the Little River Duck Dog could be the makings of its functional decline. Of course Avery and his wife, Erna, the Sprouls of Springhill NS, the Jeffery's, Alison Strang and Malcolm Ruddick of British Columbia and many other

enthusiasts moved the consciousness of the public beyond the rocky coves of Yarmouth, Queens, Shelburne, Lunenburg and Digby counties and it is their duty to see to it that the dogs they fashion are as utilitarian as the ones owned by the fishermen-hunters in Blue Rock and Rose Bay. Recent publicity in national magazines, a very enthusiastic group of dog show owners, along with Canadian Kennel Club recognition and a curious public might lead you to believe that a new breed has been discovered but the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever has been around a long long time. Some say about a hundred years, while others claim that it is probable that the Acadians and possibly even the Mic Mac Indians used tolling technique to entice wildfowl. As with most breeds of dogs the origin of the breed is lost in the past. There are, as is usual with all purebreds, some pretty mind bending tales of how captains of corn schooners and their pet dogs got all mixed up in on-shore dog breeding in Yarmouth in 1860 and the mythology would have us believe that on the seventh day God created the toller. But the use of dogs in tolling wildfowl had been practiced in Britain and Europe for hundreds of years and one of the classic descriptions of a well known use of a toller is to be found in Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey's "The Book of Duck Decoys" published in 1886 in London. "A fox coloured dog, with a good brush, is always a successful decoy dog — (the decoyman) directs his dog to bound over one of the dog jumps — the dog having jumped into view he repeats the maneuver springing into view of the ducks — this alternative jumping into sight, followed by a short, frisking run and then vanishing again is continued until the ducks have followed the enticer well under the net. The sprightlier the dog works the better as long as he is absolutley mute and obedient."

One of the plates in Sir Ralph's beautiful book, depicts in living colour a reddish dog that very closely resembles a contemporary Nova Scotia duck toller. And that's not all, for I must report for your historical frame of reference that in 1902 T.R. Pattillo used as a frontis piece in his book "Moose Hunting Salmon Fishing and Other Sketches of Sport," a

portrait of himself with "Ready my yellow tolling retriever". In chapter VI he describes the great sport he and Ready enjoyed in Queen's County Nova Scotia near Port Joli hunting geese and Blue Wings.

In addition in 1848 Henry Wm. Herbert in his *Field Sports In the United States and The British Provinces of America* describes in great detail the "tolling" of ducks and describes the training and demeanor of "tolling dogs." And in 1864 H.C. Folkard in "The Wild Fowler" refers to Herbert's work and devotes pages 371-376 to an enormous amount of detail regarding tolling wild-fowl in America and recommends, "Red or chestnut-coloured dogs, with long bushy tails are best for the purpose of tolling: the nearer they approach in colour and appearance to a fox the better." There is no doubt here of the existence of toller-like dogs and according to these references there were ducks and geese to be worked. J.S. Skinner in 1845 in "The Dog and the Sportman" gives a chapter to "Tolling for Ducks," stating that the practice began in Maryland forty years ago — "keep your dog in constant motion; a red colour is best, and a long bushy tail of great advantage." Even with the old spelling "tolling" it sounds familiar doesn't it? Skinner even believed what modern toller men and women say when you talk with them as to the effectiveness of the technique "the quantity of blood shed in many instances is astonishing". But according to Avery Nickerson the duck shooting in Yarmouth County is far from satisfactory and he and his cronies who have tolled dogs for four decades are hard pressed to get two "tolls" in a season on some once grand lakes. The fresh water lakes where the black ducks, teal, Canada Geese, and bluebills rafted after feeding on salt water marshes are either surrounded with cottages or hunters. In order to toll flocks of waterfowl a measure of peace and quiet is required. A duck's attention must be riveted on the dog as he prances out from a blind on a point of land to fetch back a small stick. If a power boat passes by at the time the dog is working a flock then the spell may be broken. In an article published in *Gun Dog* magazine in 1984 Colleen Archer quotes Alison Strang, who bought her first Toller

in 1975 and is prominent in breed circles, "few people out here (B.C.) try to hunt using the Maritime tolling method".

Down in Yarmouth a living breed pioneer, a hunter for whom guns, cartridges, coats, boots, ducking and tollers have meant more than words can convey, looks out his front window on the wind swept, foggy and ruggedly beautiful southern tip of Nova Scotia, far from the dog clubs and bulletins of central Canada. He still tolls and shoots and proudly shows photos of the results of a particularly splendid day when his best young dog worked a very large group of Canada geese right into the ambush. There were geese enough for Christmas, New Years and Easter with a few left over for a special Sunday night dinner. For a man who watched one of his dogs haul to shore several eel grass fat Canadas, last autumn the thought of a toller who hasn't worked a bird is almost more that he can bear. He is right you know. □

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