

# Out for a



# Duck

Agnes Leith introduces the tale of Hannah, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, owned by her friend Ailsa Galbreath, who takes up the story, talking of the fun she had in training Hannah. Photos by Agnes Leith.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever or Toller for short has been a distinct breed in Canada for nearly 100 years and was recognised by The Canadian Kennel Club in 1945. It was first brought to Britain in 1988 by Miss Geraldine Flack. Mike French also imported a bitch from Canada and John Norris and Miss Flack have imported from Holland and Sweden to enlarge the gene pool. There are now 256 registered with The Kennel Club.

They were used extensively in Canada by wildfowling as decoy dogs. Tolling or luring is the practice of enticing ducks within gunshot range or into long funnel-like net-traps. The original Toller was the Eastern Red Fox which lured ducks to the shore by indulging in all sorts of antics like chasing its tail and rolling about until the ducks came nearer to investigate! Wildfowling had long observed this behaviour in foxes and eventually deliberately bred a small fox-like dog for their hunting. These dogs were extensively used along the eastern sea-board of America and Canada, but particularly in Nova Scotia.

Of course the exact origins of any breed are hard to verify. One theory is that the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever and the Dutch Kooikerhondje share the same ancestry. They were certainly used for similar work also, in 17th century England. David Hancock in his book *Old Working Dogs* mentions 'a red decoy dog'.

## THE TOLLER

The Chesapeake Bay Retriever, the Labrador Retriever, the Flat Coat Retriever as well as Irish Setters and Golden Retrievers have all been credited (somewhere) with having a stake in the development of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. One thing is certain – this is a breed which has always been developed for its performance. It must have agility, playfulness and a good retrieving instinct. They are naturally intelligent, keen and alert.

The dogs stand 19-20 inches high and the bitches 18-19 inches high and their colour is any shade of red or orange. Some white is essential for true type – white feet are common, white on chest and tips of tails. A white blaze is attractive, but the standard doesn't penalise for lack of white.

The coat should be the thick double coat of a Retriever. The eyes are amber to brown. When working, this dog assumes intense concentration to the exclusion of all else, but it can also be a delightful companion and family dog. It never seems to lose its sense of fun. Such a dog is Hannah!

Hannah (Decoyman's Piper Jasmine) is a 2½ old Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever and she is a delightful dog full of character. She is owned by my friend Ailsa Galbreath of Lanarkshire, Scotland. Ailsa has a life-time experience of dogs, ▶

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**Above:** Hannah has the Toller's love of water and will retrieve happily from it.

having trained various breeds for Working Trials and Obedience. She was particularly successful in Working Trials with Border Collies and since taking up gun-dog work has trained two Labradors to Field Trial standard. All this 'dog experience' and her understanding of dogs was to come in very useful when she decided to buy and train a Toller and Ailsa will take up the story now!

"I first saw a Toller at a Game Fair in a parade of minority gun-dog breeds and I liked what I saw! At that time I had had an operation on my foot and thought my trialling days were over and now here were Tollers which struck me as handsome, intelligent dogs of a reasonable size!

"Some time later I read an article by John Norris on Working Tollers. This kept my enthusiasm going and I contacted the well-known animal trainer John Holmes who owned one. Another helpful person was Dianne Ling (a game-keeper's wife) and she had a personal knowledge of Tollers. Mind you, she did say that anyone wanting a challenge should try training Tollers!

## LIKE A DUCK TO WATER

"Having gleaned quite a lot of information I made up my mind and booked a pup from John Norris and soon after read that The Kennel Club was not going to allow dogs on the Import Register (eg Tollers) to compete in gun-dog tests or trials! Now, of course that decision has been reversed. I duly met John Norris at Wetherby where I chose Hannah from the two pups he had with him. They were lovely pups - all fluff and blue

eyes! As it was very hot I decided she was better in a cage behind the front seat. She was very voluble all the way home and tried to destroy the vet-bed! By the first evening I knew I had a very independent-minded pup!

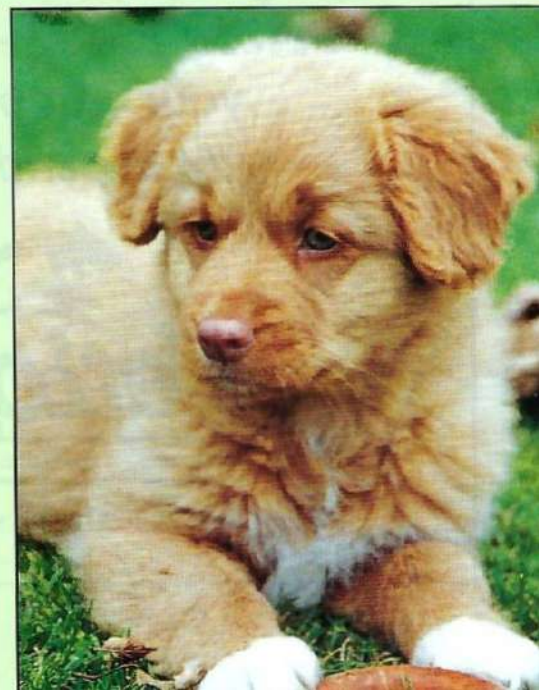
"At seven weeks she was much more active (or should I say incessant!) than my Labs had been. She was always on the go, jumping from chair to chair or busy exploring. She never seemed to need sleep! From the beginning she got on very well with the other dogs, which were never cross with her, but occasionally she was put in an indoor kennel to give them a break from chewed ears etc. Quite early in life she would sleep very happily in an outdoor kennel.

"I believe in starting basic Obedience training at a very early age - eg gently making her Sit and Stay for her dinner and not allowing her to rush past me whenever the door is opened to go out, etc.

"From early puppyhood she showed her retrieving instinct. By eight to ten weeks old we were on whistle training which she seemed to grasp very quickly, I found her great fun to train. This early training was done in the garden which is not enormous! I was putting out blinds (hidden dummies) for her in the bushes. She loved this and very quickly learned that if the dummy wasn't in one place it would be in another! This is when she started to show her propensity for going straight through instead of round any obstacles such as bushes, in

her path! She also had a great love of jumping and was fearless with it! I have bantams in the garden and having been firmly told, she soon acknowledged that they were not for chasing! Walks among wild rabbits also furthered her education!

"Hannah has the Toller's love of water and when about a year old swam a long way out in a loch with a small duck in her sights! I did get quite a fright at the distance she had swum, but when I whistled she turned at once and made it back! She is superb at avoiding distractions (in training) and will turn away immediately on command. In one incident she was



**Right:** Hannah in the garden aged nine weeks old.



**Left:** Ailsa training Hannah, whilst a fellow Gundog watches.

**Below:** Hannah, having won a Novice Gundog Working Test.



sent to retrieve a dummy thrown from a high river bank. While she was returning with the dummy a large family of baby ducks swam out from under the bank. Hannah looked at me in surprise, looked back at the ducks and swam quietly on through the flotilla with no disturbance to anyone!

### A MIND OF HER OWN

"Early on in training I realised that Hannah was a dog with a mind of her own. She is definitely not a dog for any kind of 'hard training' so in the early days I decided to reward her with tit-bits, although this is not a method generally recommended by the gun-dog fraternity! However Hannah is not a subservient dog like a Labrador or Collie – she wants to work as an equal or not at all! I'm sure harsh handling would bring immediate non-cooperation.

"Hannah has been picking-up and enjoys it. I usually have a Lab with me as well and Hannah gets a bit hyped up as she wants to do it all. One day the Lab was sent for a runner in thick brush and failed to find so I gave Hannah the chance. She disappeared into the thick cover and came out in reverse with a large pheasant. She's a trier! Early on she had difficulty carrying heavy game, but has now mastered how to balance them and does it beautifully.

"With hindsight, I think I probably took Hannah picking-up a little too early in her training. She got very wound up with the noise of guns and beaters. This summer we attended a weekly advanced gun-dog training class and she has settled down well. She very quickly sussed



**Above:** Hannah speeding away.

out the dummy-launcher situation – knowing where the fall would be!

"Temperamentally she is sharp like a Collie, aware of exactly what's happening around her all the time. An example of this was when we were walking round the stands at a Game Fair and she suddenly stopped and froze! In front of her was a taxidermy stand with a running hare! Among all the people she just stood and stared – generating considerable interest and mirth! My Labs showed no interest whatsoever!

"Also when walking through a wood one day she stopped and stared up a tree obviously wondering how to climb it to reach a squirrel! Life is never dull with a Toller.

"Referring back to colour – I would say probably the more white the better. A game-keeper with whom I pick up is

very worried in case Hannah is mistaken for a fox. I think he would even advocate a yellow jacket for her!

"We are now competing in gun-dog working tests. In her first Puppy Test she was so keen to get her mark that she did a complete somersault on the way out! She does very well when she completely understands what is required – or very badly if over-faced and flustered! Once something is learned it sticks! She is now getting her act together and in May she won the Forth and Clyde Working Gun-Dog Association Novice Test with 95 points! I really couldn't have asked for more from her. I have never regretted buying a Toller and find her great fun to train and a very amusing companion." ●