

TOLLING SEPTEMBER DUCKS

Good Sport with a "Tolling" Dog in Western Nova Scotia

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THE open season for blue wing or black ducks in Nova Scotia begins on September 1st. and although the birds have not attained their full weight so early in the season, and are yet carrying pin feathers, they are strong upon the wing, and most of them fly from the many lakes, ponds, and still-waters with which our woods abound, where they have been hatched, to the salt flats, there to gorge themselves upon the ocean's food supply, consisting chiefly of tiny snails and shellfish, returning to their secluded homes when the rising tide has covered their feeding beds. At this time of the year the young birds are comparatively unsuspecting, and if the shooter keeps to leeward of the flock, and makes no noise, it is not very difficult to approach them within range. But it is surprising how quickly they "take the hint", and after one or two shots have been discharged in their midst, they are apt to choose their location for sleep and play in some practically impossible position. In nearly all our lakes, ledges of rocks will be uncovered here and there during the drought of early fall, and these rocky strips are generally remote enough from the wooded shores to afford the birds perfect immunity from the smoothbore. Here they sit upon the flattest stones, sleep, preen their feathers, and take an occasional swallow of water, enjoying themselves immensely, until some old mother duck awakens the sleepers, and announces with harsh quacks, that the tide has ebbed off, and the feeding beds are again exposed. Whereupon they fly out in small and large flocks, leaving not a duck behind.

If you happen to know a lake where these birds have a haunt such as I have tried to describe, and "if" you own a "Tolling Dog" sport awaits your pleasure, and most delightful sport at that. Chances are your gun has been idle since the duck season

closed on March 1st, sleeping in her case, well oiled, where she was put to bed by your loving hands, unless possibly you are situated where you intercept the line of plover and other shore birds during their migration Southwards. At these you may have taken a day or two off after the opening day, which in Nova Scotia is on August 15th. But after all shooting beneath a summer sun is not serious sport. Now however your quick eye has caught the red and yellow color of the hard woods just changing from their summer dress of green, and a something indescribable has taken possession of your being, you feel it in your blood, and ten chances to one your wife catches you unawares as you examine the "left over" stock of smokeless shells, or take a look to see if the tent needs repairing, or a dozen other little signs she knows so well. If you are blessed with the right sort of woman she anticipates your pleasure, and you are happy to share it together. Your duck dog (a "Toler" of course) has been eyeing your movements with suspicion since the first night's frost lay white upon the front lawn, and now scarcely leaves your heels. All at once you seem to understand the symptoms, and oh yes, why of course! It's fall! What that means to you if you are a lover of the great outdoors it is not necessary to here record. There is only one cure for it, viz: The woods, your dog, and gun. Now is the time of year to take your wife along too, and live outdoors in perfect comfort, provided there is a little woodcraft in your make up. No torturing flies to spoil her trip, nor burning sun to blister her tender skin. Reader do you ever take yours? I do, and we both are homesick for the woods, when we turn our faces homeward. The temperature of the streams has fallen, and lusty trout again await with keen appetites in the ripples and runs, whence they left for the deep cooling "spring holes" as

the summer's heat became oppressive. Therefore our outfit shall be tolling dog, gun, fly-rod, tent, and grub. Our canoe has been sent on ahead to Porter's Lake, some fourteen miles from home, and this will be our objective point. Here a few "summer tourists" have escaped the maddening heat of cities, and enjoyed the hospitality at Leonard's, for where can one find such home cooking as Mrs. Comeau prepares—delicious fresh honey, cream, eggs, and berries wet with dew, not to mention trout just from the water. To those who have not yet discovered Porter's Lake let me gently intimate there is still another charm awaits them down here by the sea. Leonard is making cider from the luscious windfalls which carpet the orchard as we drive in through the gate, and in answer to our question "any ducks?" replies:

"I hear them quacking up the lake every day, guess a mighty lot hatched out last spring."

We carry our canvas canoe to the lake shore, and after loading our tent and other duffle therein, chirp to Lily, our tolling bitch steadying the little craft with the paddle as she springs on board and curls up between our feet. Paddling up the lake to a small island where young birch trees afford us ample fuel for a fire, and also spruces grow, the tips of whose branches we will use to make our bed upon, we push ashore and put up the tent. Soon the kettle boils and the fry pan sings, and our forest home is complete. Pull back the tent flap and take a look inside. The spruce browse makes a most inviting bed does it not, with the heavy wool blankets unrolled and spread upon them and how deliciously fragrant! Extra clothes, wool socks, and various little nick knacks beloved by the gentler sex, hang upon the dry line which stretches overhead below the ridgepole, the fire crackles out in front, and the kettle steams on the fire stick. Talk about living! well, after all it is the only life worth while. The tide is low out to the sea-shore and no ducks are now in the Porter's Lake, but we will paddle up to the inlet and land a few trout for supper, and also take a look for duck "signs." Passing close

by a rocky ledge of stones just showing in a long strip above the water, we find their haunt: See the feathers, spilled as the birds have preened themselves, floating here and there



1. A Fine "Toller"
 2. Black Ducks and Plover
 3. Result of Tolling: Shot at Porter's Lake,
 Sept. 1913: j "Lily" in evidence

among the stones, while upon every flat boulder fresh droppings lie, proof enough that a large flock of blue wings have been using here, and now note how well their high tide home is chosen. The nearest land is a hundred and fifty yards away; a small island it is, with about three yards' width of rocky beach. Two or three granite boulders stand upon the point, while hard hacks and brakes grow in profusion all about them. Just behind stands a stunted spruce tree, its low spreading limbs growing out above the boulders, completing a perfect natural "blind." A passage between the rocks leading to the beach just wide enough to "run the dog" completes the whole. If the wind does not blow from our blind towards the ledge the birds are "using" tomorrow morning, we are sure of ducks, for it must never be forgotten that ducks will not "toll" to windward, across wind, fair wind, or calm, and the birds will come to a tolling dog properly played nine times out of ten.

We push off from shore and paddle up to the inlet, and soon a half dozen trout lie flapping their tails on the canvas bottom of our canoe. "Any old fly" takes this time of year, for the fish are hungry owing to the absence of flies and insects upon the water, and each cast has brought a quick response from the rips and eddies. Six trout are ample for our needs, both for supper and early breakfast, so we reel in, and before they cease to squirm they are frying in hot pork scraps until done to a dark chestnut brown. I have heard some people say they did not care for trout, but I have often wondered if they ever tasted them when properly cooked, and under the above conditions. The tide will be half flood by sunrise on the morrow and we must be waiting in our blind before the ducks return. Remembering the old adage "Early to bed, early to rise, etc." we act accordingly, and at an early hour stretch out upon our fragrant bed of balsams, pull the warm blankets over us and are soon asleep. It is "goose grey" in the morning when our breakfast is swallowed, and the fire having been deadened with a tin or two of lake water, we leave our little island home be-

hind. A few quick, strong strokes of our paddles and the blind is reached. Stepping out we lift the canoe on shore, and push her bottom up among the stunted bushes, for even if the birds we seek are young their keen eyes detect any unusual object. Now the sun comes up above the trees, flooding the lake with the light and warmth. How beautiful the various colors of the autumn trees appear, reflected in the quiet water. The varying colors of the maple ranging from bright crimson down to purple, the fringe of hard hacks with their bright red foliage and brighter berries, blending with those of the larger of their kind, the deep green of the soft woods mirrored in the water looking like play trees, which as children we all loved to pull from out our "Noah's Ark" on Christmas morning. Even the wide yellow leaves of the dogwood do not stand out in discord, but seem to mingle in such a way as to please the eye and complete the whole. The little island back of us looks like a gaily trimmed lady's hat creation, and she of the corduroy skirt at once names it "Lady Hat Island." A belated muskrat "steams" in towards shore, causing "Lily" to prick her ears and intently watch his passage. Two loons begin calling to each other from either end of the lake, their weird high pitched screams echoing and reaching from shore to shore. On our island a red squirrel scolds us with little nervous, coughing, wheezing chirps, as he jerks himself along a convenient limb to gratify his curiosity. Little solitary prisoner, he must have crossed upon the ice last winter or taken a long swim from shore this summer, little suspecting the chance he ran that some hungry lake trout did not spy him, and pull him under. We suddenly forget it all as the rush of downward curved wings sounding like escaping compressed air smites our ears, and glancing upward, we see a flock of some three hundred ducks or more toboggan down from above the trees, alighting with swish--swisssh—on the glassy surface of the lake close to their favorite ledge, some of their number even dropping upon the stones in their greed to take possession of the best roosting and sleep-

ing spots. No trouble to tell they have just come from the salt flats; every bill is quickly submerged, only to be raised and lowered again and again, as the cool lake water slakes their burning thirst. We wait a few minutes until all have drunk their fill, then pulling forth from out of my pocket an old leather glove rolled up and tied tightly about with string, I toss it up over the boulder to our left on the narrow beach below. Lily will "play" on any subject, even a stone if nothing else be handy, but the glove makes no noise as it falls upon the shale, and this is desirable this morning, there being no wind or lap of waves upon the beach to destroy the sound a stick or harder object would occasion. The bitch is so near the color and appearance of a fox (even to her white tipped brush) that it would be impossible to distinguish her from sly reynard at any great distance. She "plays" very fast this morning, being exceedingly keen, this being her first day with the gun for the season. The sun shines full upon her dense coat of fox red, and as the birds observe her, up goes every head as they look in wonder and surprise. First one, and then another swims a few yards nearer, and catching the curiosity from these, every bird swims as fast as pads will propel them towards the dog. Back and forth she scampers, disappearing as she runs behind the rocks to drop the glove into my waiting hand. The birds all unmindful of their danger press on, the hindmost rise and fly in front in their mad curiosity to see that streak of yellowish red. I motion as if to throw and pull back my arm. "Lil" stops upon a slanting granite, and looks down into the blind. Showing her the glove, she telegraphs her pleasure with her busy tail, which flips and wiggles up above the ferns and hard hacks. Faster yet swim the now hypnotized ducks, until the leaders are almost in our blind. So close are they, that by peering between the stones we can see their pads opening and shutting beneath the water! A downward motion of the hand brings "Lil" cowering and trembling at our feet. Losing sight of her, the birds swim up and down, hither and thither

until they mill together in one solid bunch. Crack snaps the smokeless, and crack again as the now terrified ducks jump. Eight birds lay in a string where your first barrel cut a lane through the thickest of them, and a little beyond four others are scattered. Two of these are cripples and start to swim away, but both flatten out as two narrow strips of no. 6 cut across their necks. "Lily" is now in her glory, so rapidly does she swim in her anxiety to retrieve the dead birds. The water scarcely meets above her back. Again and again she fetches her bird, running to a convenient boulder from which to spring each time, until all are safely landed. Twelve ducks at one shot may seem dangerously near the "game hog" line, and if persisted in certainly



Three Nova Scotia Ducks Retrieving Plover

would put one in that class. Much prettier shooting can be had if the birds come in to water in small bunches, and you "show the dog" as soon as they have lit. In this manner many shots can be had while the flight lasts, and quick retrieving is necessary in order to recover the dead before other ducks fly in and take alarm at the swimming dog. I believe that the Western part of Nova Scotia is the only place in the world where the Tolling Dog is bred and trained. In intelligence and affection I know of no member of the canine race that can quite approach him; and I am a lover of the "Bird Dog" having had very wide experience with them all.