



# Taking on Tollers

**David Tomlinson** watches Phillip Hutchison in action with this extraordinary Canadian breed and finds out why these foxy-looking canines can make wonderful gundogs



◀ The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling retriever is an adaptable breed, making it increasingly popular

"Most people see a Toller and fall in love with it, but if you own one, you do have to be prepared to tell people that it's not a mongrel, and that it is a Canadian breed with a special history. Tollers were originally bred to lure wildfowl. Ducks are curious birds, and the foxy looks of the Toller were used to draw the ducks closer to the shore and in range of the hidden Gun. The dog was then expected to retrieve any birds that were shot.

"I doubt if there are more than 10 people in the UK who work their Tollers seriously on shoots, though there are certainly more that go shooting. They are highly adaptable, so you can work them in the beating line or pick-up with them. The fact that they are such an adaptable breed is reflected in their popularity in agility and fly-ball competitions."

Phillip's wife, Amanda, shares his enthusiasm for Tollers, pointing out to me that they are ideal dogs in a family environment because, "They're such gentle dogs and excellent with children." Amanda demonstrated this by showing how well the Tollers get on with their 10-month-old son, Noah.

As Phillip has worked with a variety of gundogs, I asked him what Tollers were like to train. "They're certainly not as easy as a Labrador, but they are intelligent and quick to learn. They are also sensitive and don't like being told off, and if the handler is too heavy-handed with them, they will simply stop working. I also find that they get bored easily, so you have to be prepared to be as versatile as possible in your training. Perhaps surprisingly, I haven't found them to be enthusiastic swimmers, and I think that's something to do with them being bred to trot along the edge of the water to draw the duck, rather than actually go in and swim.

"The first Toller dog I trained was really impressive at just nine months old, walking to heel, stopping on the whistle, even retrieving blinds. At that stage he had never been taken shooting, but he was certainly ready to go. I sold him to a working home — one of the troubles with being a professional trainer is that you have to make a living, and sometimes that involves

I am sure that you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of professional gundog trainers who specialise in Nova Scotia Duck Tolling retrievers. On second thoughts, I think it's more likely you can count on one finger the number of such specialists. If you want help training your Toller to the gun, then Phillip Hutchison is the man to turn to.

Though Phillip owns both working springers and Labradors and has experience training most other breeds of gundogs, the foxy-looking North American retrievers are what he has decided to concentrate on. Tollers are a fairly new import to this country, only arriving here in 1988 and relatively few are used in the shooting field.

Though they may have the longest name of any gundog, the Toller (as it's generally known for short) is the smallest of the retrievers, with the ideal height of dogs just 19in to 20in, the bitches slightly smaller. They are very active animals, and enthusiasts insist that it is a great mistake to think of them as miniature golden retrievers, as apart from their colour and an ability to retrieve, the two breeds are quite unlike.

I take the blame for Phillip's enthusiasm for the breed, as it was a photograph of mine,

illustrating this column, that first caught his eye. He liked the look of what he saw, and the fact that this was a breed small enough to fit in a small house was one of the appealing factors. Well aware of the pitfalls of buying a dog of the wrong breeding, Phillip did his homework thoroughly before acquiring his first Toller.

"John Norris is the leading breeder of working

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Tollers, and his Decoymans kennel is well known. He was particularly helpful, but I'm afraid that some of the breeders are really only interested in showing and were distinctly unfriendly and quite rude. There's only a small gene pool of Tollers in this country, so inevitably everybody knows everybody else, and sadly they don't all get on.



▲ Clockwise from above: Phillip's Labrador stud dog; Alfie, an English springer/ border collie cross; Phillip with some of his Tollers

selling your best dogs."

Though Phillip and his wife Amanda have been involved professionally with dogs for a number of years, it was only last June that the opportunity arose for them to run their own training and boarding kennels. "I used to help Tony Johnson, of Africandawns. He suffered from poor health last year and decided to retire, but was reluctant to sell the business to someone he didn't know, so he offered us the lease. We jumped at the opportunity, and though it's been a struggle financially, we are really enjoying running our own business."

As with many professional trainers, the boarding kennels provide the financial backbone of the business. This is, however, highly seasonal, giving plenty of time for training during the less busy periods. Regular advertisements in the classified columns of ST' have brought in plenty of gundog business, including gundogs coming in for basic obedience work.

"I've currently got nine gundogs of different breeds in for training, plus four for obedience work. I have a rule of never having more than 15 dogs in at once, as otherwise it's impossible to give each one the time it needs. I enjoy the challenge of difficult dogs.

One of the dogs I'm working with at the moment is Alfie, an English springer/border collie cross. He's nine months old and coming on really

well. What's fun about training a dog like Alfie is that you don't really know what to expect, and if you do well everybody is thrilled to bits. Alfie is very intelligent and a fast learner, and I'm sure he's going to make an outstanding shooting dog."

As well as training dogs for clients, Phillip offers training sessions with dog and owner. These have proved successful and popular, and, as many professionals like to remind you, training the owner is often more important than training the dog, though often rather harder to do.

Phillip's kennels are in the Cambridgeshire Fens, between Chatteris and Huntingdon. I visited on one of the windiest days of the year, with a gale howling across the flat lands, whipping up the topsoil and creating what's known in those parts as a fenblow. It made photography difficult, but explains how I managed to get photographs of Tollers with pointed ears — their ears normally flop down in classic retriever fashion. ■

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Phillip Hutchison can be contacted at Fallowfen Training Kennels, tel (01487) 822184, or mobile (07752) 594965, email fallowfen@btconnect.com The first "Fallowfen" litter of Tollers is due soon.