

## GUNDOGS

**T**he Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever may have the longest name of any gundog breed, but the dog itself is by far the smallest of the retrievers.

The permitted weight for dogs is between 45lbs and 51lbs and, for bitches, 37lbs to 43lbs. That is not much more than a working springer, and is about two-thirds the weight of a golden retriever. And, at 19in to 20in at the shoulder for a male and 18in to 19in for a female, its height is also similar to that of a springer.

Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever is such a mouthful that most enthusiasts simply call the dog a "toller". A distinct breed for more than 100 years, it was first recognised by the Canadian Kennel Club in 1945, but only gained recognition by our own Kennel Club as recently as 1988. It gained its Interim Breed Standard to the gundog list in 1992. The late Geraldine Flack first imported the breed into the UK in 1988. As its name suggests, it is a Canadian breed, and it evolved to toll, or lure, ducks. Ducks have a fatal fascination for foxes, and the sight of a playful toller, looking just like a fox, was sufficient to entice them towards the hidden Gun. Once the duck or ducks were shot, the toller was expected to retrieve them.

There are lots of stories about its origins, of which the most fanciful is that it is a fox/retriever cross. Appealing though this story is, foxes are incapable of hybridising with dogs, so this isn't how the toller gained its foxy looks. Most historians accept that it originated in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, in the middle years of the 19th century. A Mr Allen mated a liver-coloured flat-coated retriever with a Labrador-type dog — the Labrador wasn't then an accepted breed. Female descendants were then mated to a brown cocker spaniel, while a later mating with an Irish setter gave the breed its colour.



▲ Tollers are attractive, compact working retrievers which are set to hit the big time in the UK

A number of other breeds are also possible ancestors of the toller, including the Brittany — certainly, the toller's face does look a little like that of a Brittany — the golden retriever and the Chesapeake Bay retriever. Whatever the breeding, the result is a small, compact retriever, with a foxy appearance and colour, and a tremendous enthusiasm for water. It was originally known as the "little river duck dog", after the district of Yarmouth County where it was developed.

Today, the toller is a popular gundog throughout Canada. I met my first toller some years ago, when I was pike fishing on Great Slave Lake in Canada's North West Territory. This particular dog was famed as a terrific swimmer, and it thought nothing of swimming from island to island within the lake. Great Slave Lake, by the way, is frozen for much of the year, and the water remains wickedly

cold, even during the short months of summer.

Tollers can comfortably tolerate such cold, for they have a double coat, with the outer layer being exceptionally water-resistant. Tollers that have been swimming dry out remarkably quickly, making them ideal dogs for the wildfowler. They also have a great enthusiasm for water, and are exceptionally strong swimmers.

H.A.P. Smith, writing in the American magazine *Field & Stream* nearly a century ago, described the toller as a *surf dog that has no equal. He will persevere again when dashed ashore by heavy breakers until he, at last, stems the undertow.*

He goes on to describe a retrieve his toller, Buff, made of a winged black duck. *The dog swam after this bird right out to sea beyond my anxious sight. The tide had turned and I run [sic] along shore with frantic haste, trying to locate a boat until, at last, I gave up and sorrowfully returned*

Tollers may be the smallest of all retrievers, but they have a big fan in John Norris, who has bred more than 100. **David Tomlinson** reports

# For whom the bell tolls





D. THOMSON

to fetch my gun left behind blind. My dog's few little imperfections were forgotten, and every cross word spoken to was regretted. But to my utter surprise upon reaching the blind, there lay the gam dog with the duck beside him. The distance swam through the ice and cold water must have exceeded three miles, and he seemed none the worse for it.

When, 10 years ago, John acquired his first toller, he wasn't looking for a shooting companion, but for a genuine dog. John had been the decoy man at a Decoy, near Ipswich, for eight years, but the decoy dog, a mongrel rescue, had led him to hear that there was a specific breed bred to decoy ducks, so approached the Kennel Club for further information. Through the Club, he learned of the toller, and he eventually managed to buy a seven-week-old bitch, *Mary Mac*, from the late Annie, followed by a second bitch puppy, *Winifred*, and a male puppy, *Meg*, from Mike French, two years later.

At that time, tollers were very rare in this country. However, John's pups soon proved their worth as both decoys and shooting companions and, before long, he found himself heavily involved with the breed. In the past decade, he has done more for the breed than anyone else to establish the toller as a gundog in Britain. This has involved organizing training days and judging tests as far as Sweden and Switzerland while, in his quest for fresh blood, he has imported tollers from Holland and Sweden.

He has bred more than 100, exported pups to Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Bermuda, Guernsey, and, yes, even Canada. One of John's dogs, *Mary Mac's* *Piper Bracken*, went on to become a Canadian Champion and, another (sister of *Bracken*), *Decoy Mary Mac's* *Piper* became the first female international champion in the world to hold such a title for work and show, something of which John is immensely proud.

All the tollers John has bred at Decoy Kennels have been tattooed in the ear, so they are instantly identifiable. Hip dysplasia can be a problem with the breed, so the dogs bred from Decoy Kennels are those with a better-than-average hip score; all the dogs are tested, too.

John believes the toller is "an ideal dog for the beginner, as they are easy to train. However, I have to admit that they are the only breed I have trained, so I can't compare them to other breeds, but I have always found them to be! They are certainly eager to please, have a good nose, and they are crazy water dogs. Because of their double coat, they never get cold, and they do shiver; it is invariably with excitement.

"Their only real disadvantage as a gundog is the fact that they do look so like a

fox, though I have never had a problem with my dogs. In Sweden, where they are used to flush out roe deer and foxes, they wear fluorescent yellow jackets, which is a sensible precaution.

"I have found the hardest thing to train them to do is to get them to hold on to a retrieve when they come out of the water. They invariably want to put down the dummy, or duck, and then have a shake. But, once you have this sorted out, you are unlikely to have any more problems. Tollers will hunt like spaniels, and they aren't afraid of even the thickest cover. Also, their tails are so well furred they never suffer accidental damage, like undocked spaniels.

"They will point game. They usually lock on at a range of a couple of yards, and will hold the point for some time, before slowly stalking forward to flush. They make excellent soft-mouthed retrievers, and I do a lot of picking-up with my dogs. They also make outstanding agility dogs — my wife, Tricia, competes in agility competitions with two of our tollers."

Tollers are one of the newest of gundog breeds here in the UK, so few people have had the chance to see one working, though John has done displays with his dogs at game fairs and country shows. He insists that the working instinct is so strong in tollers that it doesn't matter whether they have been bred for work or show, as the latter invariably have just as much working instinct as those from pure working stock.

On 1 July, tollers come off the Kennel Club's import register, which means that they will be eligible to be shown and worked to championship level. This is certain to increase interest in the breed, though John is worried that more emphasis will be given to showing.

"We should never forget that tollers owe their origins to the duck shooters or hunters, who developed the breed as a hunting dog. There are a growing number of toller clubs round the world, but their main interest is in showing the breed. But what they are showing is a hunting dog, while the shooters are not hunting a show dog. It is essential that we do all we can to preserve the tollers' working heritage." ■

For further information on tollers, contact John, tel (01473) 659302, or visit [www.tollers.com](http://www.tollers.com)

► **Next generation: John with some toller pups. In his quest for fresh blood, John has imported tollers from Holland and Sweden**



**Kennel notes**  
by Keith Erlandson

## The final countdown

When feeding dry food, it is essential that the pregnant bitch should have access to water at all times. You would imagine that this would be a common-sense issue but, years ago, I confirmed a pregnancy for a client, but his bitch had no pups, having absorbed them. Later, I learned that he fed his dogs in the evening and then shut them up in sleeping quarters to keep them quiet, and they had no water until the following morning. The mind boggles. Obviously, dehydration had set in.

Some authorities advise giving the bitch a booster injection for parvovirus a fortnight before whelping, to strengthen the pup's maternal immunity after birth, but I prefer to vaccinate the pups at six weeks.

Pregnant bitches should be wormed, which I do using Panacur, a fortnight before birth, but the manufacturers advise dosing a bitch with a four-gram sachet every day for the final three weeks of pregnancy.

It is claimed that this regimen will ensure that the pups will be born virtually free of roundworms, but will cost about £21, against between £2 and £3 if two or three sachets are administered as a single dose two weeks before birth, according to the breed and weight of the bitch. ■

