A photograph of a dog swimming in the ocean. The dog's head is a brown and white speckled retriever, but its back is a large, upright, brown, shaggy mass that resembles a fox's tail. The water is dark blue with white foam from the dog's movement.

IT'S A FOX...IT'S A RETRIEVER...IT'S...

THE UNBELIEVABLE
TOLLING
DOG



On bluebird days, when ducks are rafting offshore and a boatload of decoys won't bring them in, you need this artful deceiver

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HANSON CARROLL
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Canadians now recognize the tolling retriever as a breed.

BY JEROME B. ROBINSON

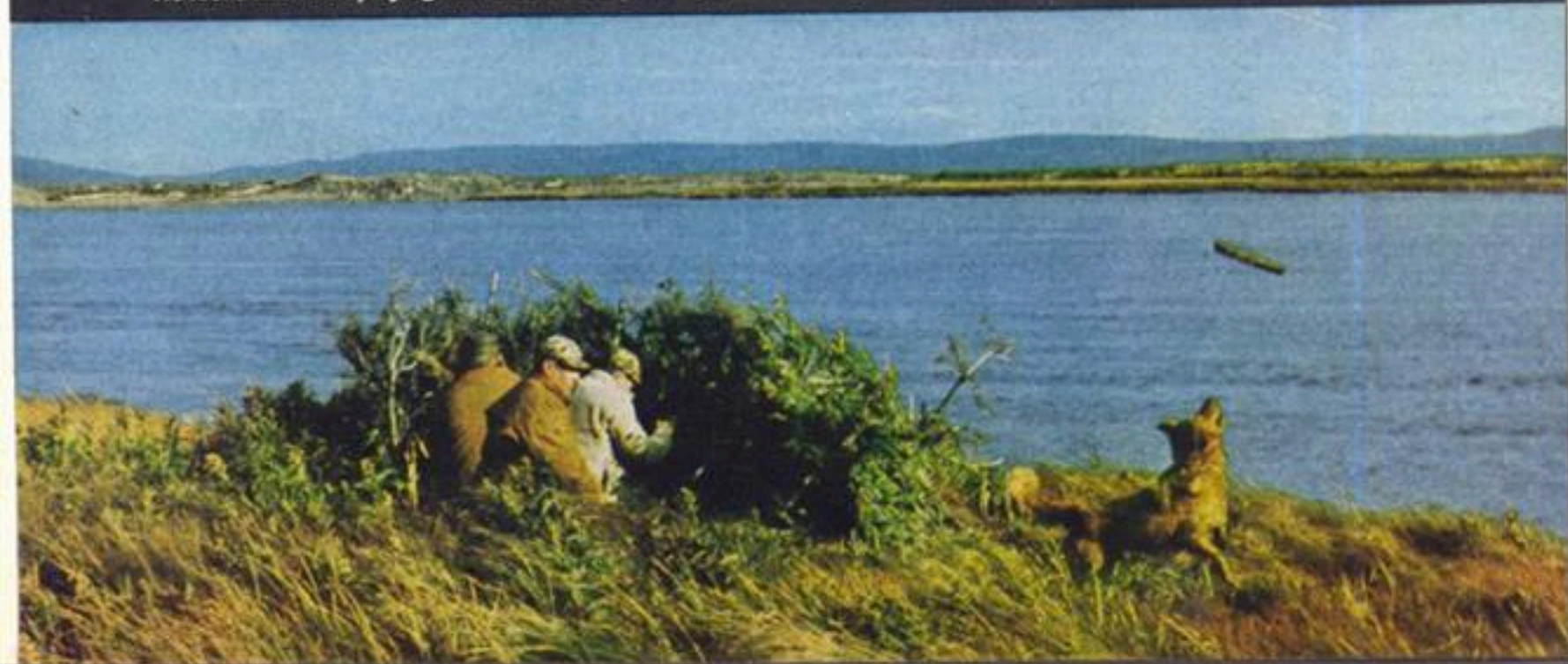
GUN DOGS EDITOR

It must have been an odd sight. Two men crouched in brushy blinds 20 feet apart on the open shoreline of the lake. Between them stretched a length of rope in the center of which a red fox skin was attached. The skin had been stretched and dried on a board and retained some slight resemblance to the animal that had once worn it. Without sound the two men played a game of tug-of-war with the rope, causing the fox skin to jump and dance back and forth across the opening between the brush blinds.

A couple of hundred yards out on the open water a raft of several hundred black ducks cavorted, washing away the salt from the sea water that had collected on their feathers. Each day a flight of blacks flew ten miles inland from the sea to spend the day resting and preening in the fresh water of the lake.

The men had rigged the fox skin to lure the birds close enough for a shot. The ducks spotted the dancing fox skin and their heads rose high in curious study. Quacking and chuckling, the birds gave up *(Continued on page 113)*

He looks like a fox playing with a stick. It's a deadly game—deadly for the rafted ducks drawn within range by curiosity.



The Unbelievable Tolling Dog

(Continued from page 57)

their bathing and watched the fox skin dance back and forth across the little beach. Eventually a dozen birds broke from the large flock and began swimming towards shore for a closer look at the strange antics. As they came closer they drew their heads snugly down upon their bodies, no longer wary of the performance. Curiosity pulled them towards shore like a magnet.

When the ducks were 30 yards from shore the men dropped the rope. As the birds bunched together in cautious observance of this change in the action, the men poked the muzzles of their shotguns through the brush of the blinds and fired as one. They killed most of the birds on the opening salvo and dropped several more with their second barrels as the survivors flushed.

The ruse is an old one. If there is one thing that will bring ducks off the open water and right in to shore it is the sight of a red fox jumping and playing along the shoreline.

First to figure out this game were the foxes. Hunting in pairs, one creeps to the water's edge and waits in motionless anticipation. His mate flashes about on the beach hopping and jumping, thrashing its brushy tail. Its action is tireless and success depends on the playing fox's ability to show no interest in the approach of the curious ducks. Curiosity will draw the birds in to the bank where her mate waits to pounce.

Indians knew that foxes caught their ducks in this manner and used a fox skin to draw ducks within range of bows and arrows and later into the range of their guns.

American market hunters also used the ruse. Early writings indicate that a favorite way of bringing in a passing flight of redheads was to wave a red handkerchief attached to a long pole stuck up through the top of a blind. Scoters will swing in from a passing line of flight if a white flag is waved from a ledge where gunners wait. Blue-bills are attracted by a red flag waved right at the water's edge. All rely on the curiosity of waterfowl, but it is the fox trick that is most dependable.

It is not known who the first man was to train a dog to act like a fox, but he was probably a Frenchman. It has been said that dogs trained to play like foxes were used in medieval France to lure flocks of wild ducks under tunnels of netting where they were trapped and killed for the nobility.

The early French Acadians in Nova Scotia were first on this continent to breed dogs that looked like foxes and train them to play the fox game. They called them Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers and they have been bred and refined in that maritime province for many generations. Any Nova Scotia duck hunter can tell you what a tolling dog can do, and most have had tolling dogs owned by some member of their families. Elsewhere one seldom hears of tolling dogs.

A tolling dog works best on the days when decoys don't work at all. A sunny

day with a light breeze and a blue sky is ideal. Many Nova Scotia gunners use their tolling dogs only when the weather makes decoying improbable. On those days when the ducks are rafted on open water and every duck that comes along automatically decoys to the large flock, a tolling dog is a most effective duck magnet.

Then the Nova Scotian heads for an inland lake before daylight and settles in a tiny blind on the windward side of the lake. He is forthright in his belief that ducks can smell and so he sets up downwind. His tolling dog, quick, alert, small and red as a fox, nestles beside him in the blind. He is perfectly obedient and will not move unless invited to do so by his master. Only the little dog's head moves. His bright eyes are intent on his master and if the men in the blind are talking his eyes dart from one speaker to the next. His ears are pricked upright. He has a look of intense intelligence.

Usually the tolling dog owner will have brought along a friend or two in order to increase the number of guns in the blind. In this game it is understood that the first salvo of shots will sluice the birds on the water and it is necessary to have several licensed gunners on hand to share the bag lest the limit be exceeded and the warden close at hand. Since Canadian daily bag limits are larger than ours, this type of shooting is practical, if nothing else.

The men settle in the blind, hollowing out places where they can sit motionlessly in comfort. As daylight comes on conversation is limited. The men wait and listen for the rippling sound of ducks dropping down from high altitudes to settle on the lake for the day. Fishing boats moving along the coast will put up flights of ducks that spent the night at sea. These will come into fresh water to bathe and rest during the day. At high tide others will be driven off their salt water feeding areas and will come in to freshwater.

Overhead the first flight is heard, a whoosh of air through their wings as the birds parachute towards the water. The little tolling dog lies steady but his eyes snap with anticipation. Moments later another flight whooshes overhead and the men can see the white spray fly in the dim light when the birds skate on to the surface of the lake 200 yards out front. By full daylight more than a hundred black ducks are rafted there and more are coming in groups of two to 20.

All the decoys a man could carry would not help in such a situation. Any ducks coming in to the lake would automatically stool with that offshore raft of happy quacking, preening birds. By nine o'clock the raft has built to more than 300 ducks. The closest are 200 yards from shore and stretch in a line several hundred yards long.

"'Bout time I showed the dog," the tall leathery-faced Nova Scotian says softly to his companions.

"You ready Rusty?" he asks the

dog. Rusty's face is eager. His eyes dance with excitement, his ears are tuned to the sounds of the ducks quacking out front and he watches happily as the men pull their three-shot 12-gauge automatics from their cases and softly shove in the low base loads of number six shot. Despite his excitement, however, the dog lies still awaiting his master's command.

The gunners shove the muzzles of their guns through the peek holes in the face of the blind to make sure they have clear views for shooting. They nod that they are ready.

Now the dog and his master begin a ritual that they have played together hundreds of times. The dog's eyes brighten as his master pulls a corn-cob-size stick from his pocket and throws it out.

"Rusty," the tolling dog owner hisses.

Rusty darts out of the blind across the opening, picks up the stick and rushes back and drops it at his hidden master's hand. The stick is thrown again and once more Rusty rushes out, his long white-tipped orange tail lashing in counter-balancing strokes as he hops over low obstacles. This time the little dog tosses the stick in the air and jumps to catch it on his way back to the blind. His performance is being put on in clear view of the offshore ducks. The men crouch quietly in the blind and Rusty rushes back and forth across the opening, dancing, jumping and thrashing his tail. The early sun glints on his burnished orange coat as he brings back the stick playfully bouncing with enthusiasm. Never does the dog stop to look out at the ducks though it is clear he knows they are there. His ears perk up each time the quack of a duck is heard, but the dog gives no other indication of interest in the ducks. His game is with the stick and he goes at it with ever growing playfulness. Never does he make any vocal sound.

"They're looking," one of the men whispers after the game has been in progress 15 minutes. "The whole flock has their heads up."

The birds have spotted the dog and are studying him curiously. Sometimes it takes the birds nearly an hour to make up their minds to swim in to see what the dog-that-looks-like-a-fox is up to. Other times part of the flock will come right away. There is one general rule; when they start coming, the ducks will come all the way to the blind unless something scares them off.

The dog continues darting out to pick up the thrown stick and retrieve it to his master. He has made about 100 retrieves by this time. He may have to make more than 500 retrieves before the ducks come within range. The dog must be just as enthusiastic at that time as when he started the game. Such an ability to remain playful is not found in just any breed of dog; it is the mark of a well-bred Nova Scotia tolling dog.

Even if the ducks quack or hiss as

they come in, the dog must show no interest. He must play with the stick ever more eagerly giving a credible demonstration that playing is his only game. The gunners know that the dog is aware of what is happening. They can see him keeping the ducks in view out of the corner of his eye as he darts in with the stick. His quickened excitement in his dancing retrieves makes it apparent that he knows what is about to happen.

When the birds are 30 yards from the blind (perfect range for full patterning of the 28-inch modified shot-guns) Rusty's owner takes the stick from the little dog for the last time and puts it in his pocket. With his free hand he signals and the dog immediately lies down beside his master. In a quandary over the dog's disappearance, the ducks bunch tightly together and turn broadside. The roar of the guns combines with the roar of wings. In front of the blind a dozen of the 20 ducks that came in lie dead amidst a drift of feathers.

Now, with all the steadiness of a well-trained retriever, Rusty awaits his master's command and then swims out into the lake to retrieve the dead birds. He will not quit until every bird is laid at his master's feet.

Rusty is a typical Nova Scotia tolling dog. He weighs about 25 pounds, is orange in color with a white-tipped tail, white shirt front, and a small white blaze on his face. His tail is as long

and thick as a fox's brush and his movements are quick and flashy. At four years old he plays with puppy-like enthusiasm but combines his playfulness with the consistency and well-mannered behavior of a veteran.

Like most Nova Scotia tolling dogs, Rusty came from Little River stock and his exact ancestry beyond that is unknown. Little River, in southern Nova Scotia, is a little fishing community near the sea and the freshwater lakes. It is ideal waterfowl country and tolling dogs have been bred and used there for many generations. Many still refer to these dogs as Little River Tollers.

Rusty's owner, Joel Smith of Yarmouth, is in his sixties, yet he remembers that his grandfather always went to Little River whenever he wanted a new tolling dog.

Though the full background of the tolling dog ancestry is obscure, a good deal of collie and a smattering of Chesapeake retriever were included in Rusty's ingredients, intentionally put there by breeders, who wanted collie blood for intelligence and playfulness and Chesapeake for a thick undercoat and determination in retrieving.

Other strains include blending of collie, golden retriever and spitz.

Since 1960 Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers have been recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club as the only purely Canadian breed. The campaign to have the tolling dog registered by the Canadian Kennel Club was led by W.

Avery Nickerson, of Yarmouth, who maintains a tolling dog kennel. Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers are now regularly shown at Canadian bench shows. At this point there are no tolling dog field trials, but interest is growing among breeders.

Ducks react to tolling dogs in various ways. Early in the season, when the broods are still intact, it is common for the ducks to come to shore quacking and hissing their hatred of what appears to them to be their mortal enemy, the fox. Later in the season when the large flocks build up, it is common for the ducks to come to the tolling dog without making a sound and often with their chins right down on their chests. They sail in full of confidence and curiosity.

While it is usual to have part of a large flock of ducks break off from the main raft and toll to the dog, it often happens that the whole raft will come in. Some tolling dog owners report times when flocks of 300 birds would come as a mass as soon as the dog was shown.

"Once they start, they'll come all the way," is the general rule among duck tollers and unless the dog breaks and rushes the ducks (an unpardonable error) the birds will come all the way to the bank and some will often climb ashore within a few yards of where the dog is playing.

Bluebills are probably the easiest ducks to toll, but wary black ducks are most commonly hunted by tolling. Canada geese will toll to a dog at times, but often stop 50 or 60 yards from shore. Bluewinged teal often get so excited by a tolling dog that they will fly into shore and light right in front of the dog.

Once the birds have come all the way to the bank and are quietly watching the dog they often appear to lose interest in the dog itself and dabble along the shore seemingly without a care in the world. It often happens that a few ducks will remain dabbling in some state of mesmerization even after the guns have slaughtered the rest of the flock.

When the ducks become transfixed to this extent it is possible to throw the stick within a few feet of them and have the dog retrieving within pouncing distance of the ducks. At this point it is necessary that the dog be absolutely trained not to go for the ducks for if he were to pounce and catch one, his future steadiness would obviously be impaired.

Tolling dogs are trained from puppyhood. At first it is a simple matter of encouraging them to be playful and to bring back sticks or balls that are thrown for them.

Persistence at play is necessary when the ducks are reluctant to toll and the dog may have to make 500 or more retrieves without a refusal.

Tolling works best where open water extends right to the bank where the blind is built. Debris in the water in front of the blind is often enough to discourage the ducks from coming all the way to the bank. They will not toll through decoys, for instance.



HEY JIM, WHAT'S THE LIMIT ON WHALES?

(see pages 10-11 →)

When they build their waterside blinds, tolling dog owners clear a short runway on high ground beside the blind so that the dog's antics will be clearly seen from the water. With conditions right and a dog showing up well, ducks sometimes are drawn in from as much as half a mile away.

Some tolling dog trainers prevent their dogs from breaking and jumping at the incoming ducks by working them on a long check cord which is tied to the blind. Most trainers agree that tolling dogs should not be worked on upland game until they have proved steady in the blind. They feel that dropping upland birds in front of an unfinished tolling dog encourages him to flush birds so that he can retrieve them. Thus, he becomes more likely to flush incoming ducks. Once steady in the blind, however, tolling dogs make excellent flushing retrievers in upland situations.

The most surprising thing about tolling dogs is that they have not spread among duck hunters everywhere. Avery Nickerson of Yarmouth, who sells more tolling dogs than anyone else, says that most of the pups sold to people from the United States are sold for pets, not hunting purposes.

With its good looks and happy, playful personality, the Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever makes a perfect family dog, but it is a shame that more are not being brought into this country for hunting.

The main reason for this appears to be that Americans object to the Nova Scotian's habit of shooting tolled ducks on the water as well as fearing they will kill more than the legal limit with this method of shooting.

Such reasoning is honorable, but it has to do with the shooter, not the dog. If the dog can bring a flock of ducks to your blind on a day when all the decoys in the world won't, then that dog is surely worth having along.

After all, you can stand up and flush the birds before you shoot. ■ ■ ■

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