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# The Toller - a breed for those who fancy something different



■ *The Toller displays a very alert nature.*

**A** FEW months ago I wrote an article for *The Countryman's Weekly* about a fascinating gundog breed known as the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever.

In fairness to those readers who also subscribe to the sister publication, I will vary this article as much as is possible.

As with so many breeds the exact origin of the

Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, or Toller, as they are commonly known, is a little vague and historical documentation is scant beyond 1850.

The birth place of the Toller is known to be Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, Canada, and at one time these dogs were known as Little River Duck dogs, named after a district in Yarmouth County.

The most popular story of

*Keith Edmunds* looks at the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever and meets a breeder dedicated to ensuring it stays a working breed...

origin suggests that in 1860 a Mr Allan mated a liver coloured Flatcoated Retriever with a Labrador. It is said that females from this litter were mated with a brown Cocker Spaniel.

Sometime later local Collie blood is said to have been added and some enthusiasts believe that the beautiful amber coat was a result of additional blood from the Irish Setter.

## Ancestry

Although Mr Allan's breeding programme may well have taken place, I personally believe that Tollers were also being produced throughout the Maritimes by simply crossing local retriever type dogs, all of which shared common ancestry, with the lesser Newfoundland.

The addition of Collie blood is interesting but by no means unique, for many believe that the Golden Retriever descended from

the Caucasian Sheepdog.

The Toller displays a heavily feathered tail similar to that of a Border Collie and also shares a very alert nature.

Duck shooting has always been associated with Canada and many of the old hand duck hunters carved superbly realistic decoys often using up to 100 decoys on a single stretch of water.

However, even with such an armada of decoys, ducks still sometimes refuse to be fooled and it is in these situations that the Toller comes into its own.

Water fowl are naturally curious and will sometimes investigate the antics of a fox cavorting on a river bank often with fatal results. Early hunters noticed this suicidal curiosity and subsequently created the Toller with its foxlike appearance.

On such a day when

**Continued overleaf...**





■ John Norris with his beautiful litter of Toller pups.

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decoying proves fruitless the duck hunter will walk the shoreline in search of a large flock of ducks on the open water. He then conceals himself and begins an amusing act aided by his

playful Toller.

A small stick is thrown along the bank and the Toller skips out to retrieve it. This will be repeated as many times as it takes to arouse the waterfowl's curiosity.

The retrieving game continues and gradually the ducks approach the gun man

waiting in ambush.

When the ducks are within range the hunter takes aim and fires, many of the fowl will lift and take flight leaving a handful of dead and wounded for the Toller to retrieve.

The most influential breeder to date was certainly the late Avery Nickerson of Yarmouth County. Nickerson founded the Harbourlight Kennels over 30 years ago and placed his Tollers throughout North America.

Avery Nickerson would go to great lengths to ensure that his dogs went to working homes and he estimated that 70 per cent of his dogs were used for hunting.

Although many of these dogs were used by sportsmen, Nickerson believed that only a few were used for tolling (enticing ducks) and most simply and successfully fulfilled the roles of rough shooting and wildfowling dogs.

## Curiosity

Rare gundog breeds of all shapes and sizes are making a come back but it is likely that much of this resurgence is due to sentiment and curiosity and not superiority in the field.

For those that do fancy something different the Toller certainly has a lot to offer.

As stated earlier the Toller is a capable and efficient rough shooting dog, its relatively small size (approximately 20 inches and weighing 45 pounds) enables the breed to push through dense cover and its superb nose rarely misses hidden game.

Like other water dogs, the Toller displays a water repellent double coat similar in texture and length to the Golden Retriever. Tollers are obviously strong and powerful swimmers and are often worked in bitterly cold conditions expected to smash through thin ice.

As a retriever the Toller is keen and quite speedy, easy to handle and ever willing to please, making it a suitable breed for novice trainers.

My introduction to the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever came via decoyman, John Norris of Nocton Decoy in Suffolk.

Over the last five years John's interest in the breed has snowballed. He has done a great deal of research and travelled hundreds of miles to obtain more facts on the breed.

At present John works two bitches, has a dog in quarantine and a pup from his recent litter.

John would like to follow in the footsteps of Avery Nickerson and ensure that the Toller remains a useful working breed.

He has practised what he preaches by placing his puppies into working homes and is currently enjoying success at working tests.

John Norris would be happy to offer any further information on the breed and can be contacted on



■ The Toller certainly has a lot to offer.