



The Toller

Don't knock it 'til you've tried it!

So, you're about to buy another gundog pup. You have decided to branch off from the over-subscribed world of Springers and Labradors. You like the German Shorthaired Pointer but you are unsure if their thin coats would be suited to your sub zero wild fowling jaunts. There are so many breeds to consider that your final decision is not easy. However, before you make your choice, take a close look at 'The Toller'.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, or Toller, originated from the icy eastern coast of Canada where the pursuit of feather and fin has always been a primary occupation. The precise history is rather vague, but it is known that tolling dogs have been used since the mid-19th century throughout the land which surrounds the Gulf of St Lawrence. Some stories relay the tale that a Mr Allen created the breed by pairing a Flatcoated Retriever with a Labrador and later added blood from the Cocker Spaniel and Irish Setter. There is also proof that in 1902 a Mr Patillo used a tolling dog named Reddy which was the result of a union between an English Setter and an Irish Red Setter. Other tales state that small farm Collies often featured in the make-up of the early tolling dogs and there

is a strong resemblance between the Toller and the yellow-eyed Dartmoor Collie.

One aspect remains constant throughout and that is the necessity for a fox-like appearance. Wild fowl often display an uncontrollable curiosity - almost to the point of being aggressive - and have been known to mob a red fox prowling on the shore line. Early duck hunters exploited this tendency by using fox skin lures to entice or 'toll' the wild fowl into range of their nets, hunting bows, and, later, shotguns. Eventually the need for a fox-like dog was realised and the Toller was subsequently created.

Various nations used tolling dogs, although the most notable were certainly France and Canada - not surprising considering that links between these two lands goes back at least 450 years when Jacques Cartier claimed much of Canadian land for France.

The art of using a tolling dog is pretty universal and proceeds something like this. A large flock of fowl is spotted far out on an inland lake; the hunter takes cover behind some natural foliage or purpose-built hide and proceeds to 'play' with his Toller by throwing a small stick along the bank for

his dog to retrieve; the Toller eagerly returns the stick, awaiting the next retrieve, and the act is repeated until the ducks have noticed the constant bustle on the shore line; greatly upset by the dog's actions, the water fowl flock in to mob the intruder, moving closer until they unwittingly come within range of the concealed duck hunter; shots ring out and with a great clatter the fowl lift, leaving behind a number of dead for the tolling dog to retrieve.

The above gives the reader a glimpse of the early requirements of the Toller, yet over the years this breed has been used very successfully as a conventional gundog, flushing and retrieving a variety of game from snipe to pheasant.

Here in Britain the Toller is still considered a rare breed and its fate as a working dog is very much dependent on the attitude of the rather xenophobic British sportsman. However, there is hope for its continuance as a gundog. John Norris, a keen field sportsman who lives and works at Nacton in Suffolk, has dedicated a great deal of time to breeding and working Tollers and to promoting them as honest workers. Still to be convinced of the Toller's working ability, I accompanied John last season on a cock pheasant shoot and was very impressed by the keen working style displayed by two of his bitches. When joining the beating line it was immediately apparent that their small yet powerful frame (18"-20"/37-51 lbs) was a distinct advantage when powering through bramble and no cover proved too thorny for these tenacious little hunters. This gutsy temperament is very controllable and both dogs dropped nicely to flush, often gazing back at John for the next command. Equally suited to the peg, both bitches were calm and collected, but, at the same time, very attentive, accurately marking the shot game.

More recently I visited John with a friend and a potential puppy owner who was given a demonstration with dummies and cold game on what was probably one of the coldest days of the year. John's bitch Meg, who had been working on the local shoot the previous day, was put through her paces in a variety of lifelike situations. Once again, she found and retrieved from the cruelest of bramble cover with no ill effect and I was reminded of the breed's suitability as a questing dog. For steadiness, the bitch was made to retrieve from various situations while dummies and dead game were flung all around her. Again, she coped admirably.

As for hardiness, at the finale of the demo John tossed a dummy into the icy water of the decoy pond, Meg leaped in,



Interim Breed Sta

Breed: Nova Scotia Duck
Tolling Retriever

Group: Gundog

General Appearance: Medium sized, compact, powerful, well muscled. A heavily feathered tail, constantly moving.

Characteristics: Jumps and plays to lure waterfowl into decoy. Retrieves dead and wounded birds. Strong swimmer.

Temperament: Kind, confident, intelligent, easy to train, playful.

Coat: Straight, repellent, double coat of medium length and softness, with a softer, dense undercoat. Slight wave on back allowed. Feathering at throat, behind ears and at back of thighs. Forelegs moderately feathered.

Colour: All shades of red or orange with lighter feathering under tail. White marks are permissible on the tip of tail, feet and chest, or as a blaze. Lack of white not to be penalised.

Size Ideal Height: Dogs 19-20" (48-51cm) Bitches 18-19" (45-48cm)

Feet: Medium size, round, tight. Toes well arched and strongly webbed. Pads thick, blending with coat colour. Dew claws should be removed.

Note: Male animals should have two apparently normal testicles fully descended into the scrotum.



smashed through the ice and was soon back on shore with a nicely presented retrieve. A quick shake and she was ready for more, so John repeated the exercise and again the bitch obliged faultlessly.

As for the future, I can only reiterate that this largely depends upon the attitude of the shooting fraternity. With such an aesthetic appearance, the Toller has already caught the eye of the show enthusiasts;

Standard



Head and Skull: Clean cut skull, slightly wedge shaped, broad, slightly rounded. Occiput not prominent. Cheeks flat. Moderate stop. Muzzle tapers from stop to nose. Nostrils well developed. Nose flesh coloured or black.

Eyes: Medium sized, almond shaped, well set apart. Alert expression. Brown to amber. Eye rims flesh coloured or black.

Ears: Triangular, medium size, set high and well back on skull. Base held very slightly erect; well feathered at back of fold, hair shorter at rounded tips.

Mouth: Jaw strong with a perfect, regular and complete scissor bite, i.e. upper teeth closely overlapping the lower teeth and set square to the jaws. Teeth sound and strong. Softness of mouth essential. Lips tight fitting flesh coloured or black.



Neck: Medium length, strongly muscled, well set on, no indication of throatiness.

Forequarters: Shoulders well laid back, muscular, medium length. Elbows close to body. Forelegs straight and strong. Pasterns strong, slightly sloping.

Body: Deep chested, ribs well sprung, brisket reaches to elbow. Back short, level topline. Loins strong and muscular. Moderate tuck up.

Hindquarters: Well muscled. Stifles well bent, hocks well let down turning neither in nor out.

Gait/Movement: Impression of power, springy, jaunty with good reach of forelegs and strong rear drive; parallel movement fore and aft. Single tracks at speed; head carried almost level with back.

Tail: Set on, slightly sloping towards croup. Broad at base, well feathered, reaching the hock. Carried below level of back at rest; when alert, curves over, not touching back.

Faults: Any departure from the foregoing points should be considered a fault and the seriousness with which the fault should be regarded should be in exact proportion to its degree.

Breed Standard by courtesy of the
Kennel Club

however, the potential as a useful working breed cannot be denied.

So, if you're looking for an all-round gundog, at home on the fore shore, sitting patiently at his master's peg or bustling

through undergrowth in search of rabbits, then the Toller should seriously be considered. But, don't take my word for it - go and see for yourselves.

Once again, a breed is indebted to its

devotees whose enthusiasm will carry the day and ensure the Toller's success. For more information on the Toller contact John Norris on 01473 659302 or Mrs Babs Harding (Hon. Sec. NSDTR Club) on 01633 400902. Ed.