



## If the Toller is the perfect duck dog then why isn't it more popular?

by Alison Day

As the little amber body gyrated on the shore the ducks drew closer; curious, even mesmerized.

But there was danger ahead — a second amber body slinking towards the water under cover of the rocks. Another fox, an accomplice, moved in for the kill. Once the ducks were in range the second fox leaped from its hiding place, grabbed its quarry by the neck, and trotted back into the woods.

The red fox comes by its reputation for cunning honestly.

But there was a human observer on this particular occasion. The scene was duly witnessed and later related to a young fisheries officer named Avery Nickerson.

Today, and not altogether unrelated to that story, Avery Nickerson raises and sings the praises of Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers — little fox-like field

dogs — in his Harbourlight Kennels in Yarmouth, N.S.

"Tollers" are unique in two ways. They are the only dog specifically bred to attract wildfowl to within gun range — in



Avery Nickerson harbors a concern that breeding for show may threaten the hunting instincts and the personality of the Nova Scotia Duck Toller.

the same manner as the fox allegedly does (and, of course, to retrieve downed birds on command).

And they are the only bona fide Canadian breed registered with the Canadian Kennel Club.

Working waterfowl with a Toller is therefore unlike any other hunting experience.

Having spotted feeding birds the hunter sneaks into position behind a blind. He incites the dog into action usually by throwing sticks along the shore. Two or three throws are usually sufficient to get the birds' attention and start them closing in, tolling to the playful dog.

The dog seems oblivious to its curious affect on the ducks and will initially show little interest in the approaching birds. But Tollers are hunters by instinct and have to be checked immediately at the first sign of desire to enter the water and chase the ducks. Once within range, the



birds are flushed as the hunter takes aim. Under the correct conditions, therefore, cumbersome decoys and cords and anchors and waders and frozen fingers can be totally unnecessary.

The Toller is an elegant little canine with an alert face, friendly, aware and responsive. They are also extremely intelligent. The coat is soft and generally amber, resembling that of a fox, with white bib and paws, and often a white blaze on the forehead. (To Avery Nickerson's chagrin, some breeders of show dogs are working toward a deeper red similar to an Irish setter coat, and elimination of the white patches.)

The ears and tail are feathery. When the dog is active the tail is arched proudly over the back. The eyes are commonly blue at birth but change to a beautiful shade of hazel as the pup matures. The nose can be black, but it is most often brown.

Smaller than most retrievers, the adult male Toller rarely exceeds 50 lbs. and stands about 20 inches tall. An adult bitch weighs about 35 lbs. and stands about 18 inches at the shoulder.

Although it loves water and makes an enthusiastic companion in the salt marshes, the dog is sufficiently versatile to be equally at home hunting upland birds. It will quarter and flush more efficiently than other retrievers, and almost as well as a spaniel.

But if effective retrieving is all you require, particularly over geese, says Avery Nickerson, then the stronger Chesapeake or Labrador should probably be your choice.

Although in extreme conditions it must take second place to a larger dog, the eager-to-please Toller is still a superb retriever that doesn't give up easily, goose or no goose. If the small mouth won't fit over the breast bone, then it'll drag the bird home by the wing or neck.

While other breeds, especially red-coated dogs, can be used to toll waterfowl, (resting birds, for instance, are particularly easy to attract) nothing else tolls like a Toller.

Avery Nickerson recalls a duck hunting trip on Northumberland Strait.

"As I took shelter behind a tree near an open field, I could see some ducks lying on the water about 300 yards out. They saw the Toller, lifted up, flew towards the dog, and landed at my feet in the field."

Even when decoys prove futile, Tollers can succeed. A bright day with winds steady at about 10 to 12 miles an hour provides ideal conditions for tolling with

a dog. Mergansers and bluebills are particularly susceptible to this ruse.

The origin of the breed has long been a subject for speculation. (Around the Yarmouth area they are known as "Little River Dogs" because they are so common in Little River Harbour and Pinkey Point, southeast of Yarmouth.)

Nickerson recalls in 1945 visiting an elderly neighbour, Eddie Kenny, then in his 80s, who was living on Turpentine Island, one of the Tusket Islands. Mr. Kenny kept a Little River dog as a pet and for hunting but remembered his father and grandfather keeping the dogs for hunting. That would place them in the area in the early 1800s.

All theories aside, he says the truth is that tollers have been bred in southwestern Nova Scotia for so long that no-one is sure of their precise origin.

It is possible French settlers introduced them when they first came to the province in 1653. (One historian lends weight to the theory by noting very sim-

*'... It is possible French settlers introduced them when they first came to the province in 1653...'*

ilar dogs were used along the Schelde Estuary in Belgium by professional market hunters using nets in the days before guns.)

Another notion is that settlers watched Micmac Indians emulate a tolling fox while hunting, so the Europeans tried to breed a dog that would do the trick. Setting out to breed a small fox-like dog (or so the story goes) they crossed an English flat-coated retriever bitch with a relative of a Labrador Retriever. The bitches of subsequent litters were crossed with Labs, Irish Setters and Cocker Spaniels, to arrive at the Toller we know today.

It was not until 1945 that the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever was registered as a recognized breed with the Canadian Kennel Club — the result of the efforts of Colonel Cyril Colwell, a well known figure in Halifax at the time. Col. Colwell bred Tollers, although he did not hunt them, and wanted the merits of the breed acknowledged.

But the registration lapsed over the next two decades, when only 14 Tollers

were registered with the C.K.C. In the early sixties, two breeders in Nova Scotia decided to change things.

Avery Nickerson of Yarmouth and Eldon Pace of Shubenacadie complied with C.K.C. by-laws, breeding the Toller through three generations in order to re-register the dog as a bona fide Canadian breed.

Nickerson raises Tollers exclusively for hunting. That, he feels, is the purpose of the dog.

"I have no objection to people buying the dogs for showing and hunting," he says. "But I will not sell dogs with breeding rights to people breeding solely for show purposes."

He harbors a serious concern that breeding merely for physical appearance could erase forever the true and unique genetic characteristics of the Toller. He breeds for intelligence, agility and speed, an amber and white coat, and a friendly, gentle temperament.

Field training the Toller presents few obstacles. Says Nickerson, "They are extremely intelligent. You can train one to do almost anything, and you never have to show a Toller who is boss, they are so willing to please."

He usually begins basic obedience training at seven weeks.

"Their retrieving instinct is so strong, and they adore water," he continues. "I've never had one that had to be coaxed into the water."

So why is it, then, that Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers are not a more popular field dog in North America?

Often it seems that people cannot get away from the big three retrievers, Chesapeakes, Labradors and Golden Retrievers. There is also widespread skepticism about this miraculous ability to toll ducks. It almost has to be seen to be believed.

"The best way to convince people about them is through exposure," says Nickerson. "If they had more exposure on television, for instance, they would be better known."

But the fact that there are so few kennels breeding pure hunting stock is perhaps the overriding factor.

Nevertheless, Tollers have proved faithful hunting companions to the extent that many of their owners would never dream of switching breeds.

They can live long lives, well into the 15th year, but like all retrievers, they run the risk of succumbing to the various ailments that regularly afflict dogs that work frequently in frigid salt water. There is very little else, though, that will temper their limitless enthusiasm for work. 🐾