

Enticing Prospect (/)

Written by Gail MacMillan. Photography: Jim Gourlay. This article was published in the January/February 2002 issue.

Nova Scotia Duck Tollers are natural retrievers from birth or, as one old-time Toller expert described them, "ready to use right out of the wrapper"



She arrived as any Super Dog should...on wings. The wings of Flight 1810 from Halifax, Summerside, and Charlottetown, that is.

"Someone's getting the most adorable puppy I've ever seen," I heard an Air Nova employee exclaim from the baggage area a few moments after the plane had touched down at the Bathurst, NB, airport. "Just look at those big, blue eyes!"

And then she was handing me a small beige crate marked "Live Animals" that housed a pair of the most intense blue eyes I'd ever seen. She'd been right. I opened the door and a downy ball of fawn-colored fluff toddled out into the bright, May sunlight. This had to be the most adorable puppy in the world.

She was bouncy, she was bright, she was beautiful. She was our very first Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, Harbourlights Highland Chance. Instantly I knew my husband Ron and I hadn't made a mistake in getting her, even though we'd never seen an actual flesh- and-blood Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever before that moment.

In fact, we'd never even heard of the breed until an article about the dogs in an issue of Saltscapes' sister publication, Eastern Woods and Waters, had captivated our attention. We'd owned retrievers for 20 years, yet the existence of these unique little canines had come as an intriguing and delightful surprise to us. Immediately we'd set out to learn more about them.

First of all, what exactly were Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers, or Tollers as they're often called? Photos showed compact dogs with a longish, red-gold coat that was frequently

trimmed with white on the paws, chest, tail, and face. Each had a handsome little face that fairly radiated eagerness, amber eyes gleaming with attentiveness. They appeared constantly at the ready, either prancing in anticipation or cavorting off to do the master's bidding. These delightful little fox-like creatures seemed to be our kind of dog.

But, then, there's much more to a dog than appearances. Eager to learn all we could about this fascinating breed, we immediately began researching it.

It wasn't easy, at that time, to find information and we quickly realized why the breed had been labeled Nova Scotia's best-kept secret. Apparently, for more than 200 years, dog fanciers in Yarmouth County, NS, the recognized ancestral home of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, had known they had a good thing in what they chose to call Little River Duck Dogs. They had been in no hurry to share their secret.

Natural retrievers from birth (or as one old-time Toller expert described them to us, "ready to use right out of the wrapper"), Little River Duck Dogs apparently required little training before being ready for their work in field and marsh. By 1945, Yarmouth County's Little River Duck Dog had been recognized as a breed by the Canadian Kennel Club and was known as the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. The Nova Scotia part of the name was easy and obvious. The duck tolling part wasn't as simple to explain to interested passersby.

Tolling, in a hunting context, means to entice or lure game. That is exactly what these singular little dogs do with ease and success. Bred to resemble red foxes, they also imitate their wild counterparts' original waterfowling methods.

The fox's tolling consists of prancing and playing about on shore in full sight of ducks rafting far out on the water. This is done while the fox's mate hides in the long grass nearby. For some inexplicable reason, waterfowl are irresistibly attracted to this performance and generally head straight for the crafty actor. Once the birds come within reach, the hidden fox springs out and dinner is assured.

A Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever works in much the same fashion. It repeatedly retrieves sticks, in plain view of the birds, for his master who is hiding in a blind or ambush. When the ducks come within range, the hunter or, as is frequently the situation with my husband and me, photographer, can shoot. (In the case of hunters, the dog must always be safely back in the blind with his master at this point.) In a hunting scenario, the dog will then rush to retrieve the kill, thus justifying the "retriever" part of his name.

We quickly learned, however, there was much more to a Nova Scotia Tolling Retriever than a long name and the unique ability to lure and retrieve waterfowl. Chance soon demonstrated that these little red dogs were possessed of a great personality and a thoroughly charming disposition.

In June, shortly after her arrival in our lives, Chance began going to school with our daughter who, at the time, was a Grade 3 teacher. The dog's gregarious personality soon made her social puppy of the year wherever she went, earning her a job as unofficial mascot for an amateur softball team.

Almost immediately, Chance proved to be no chance at all. She was a definite winner. At 49 days of age, she was retrieving in the house like a little trooper. She toddled determinedly and as fast as short puppy legs could go across our living room and down the hall after a ball. By the time she was three months, the commands of "sit," "down," and "come" were a piece of cake. (She would later earn her Companion Dog title at a Canadian Kennel Club show, going High in Trial on both days of a two-day show.)

Her willingness to please was amazing. Perhaps her only fault was over-exuberance. She loved people and life and showed it in leaps and bounds. The only rules that had to be conscientiously followed, we'd been told by her breeders, were to incorporate training into the dog's naturally playful nature and to be lavish with praise.

In fact, we were so delighted with Chance, we soon invited other Tollers to join the MacMillan clan. Harbourlights Scotia Ceilidh and later, Wallace's Molly MacMillan came to live with us.

Over the years we've frequently heard Tollers described as red Border Collies because of their high intelligence level and intense desire to work. Certainly, they are quick to pick up a vocabulary and even quicker to interpret body language. Be ready when you take out your car keys or put on your running shoes! They'll know immediately what to expect. And while they don't need a flock of waterfowl to retrieve, they do need the exercise of retrieving tennis balls and deserve to be kept in a fenced area, never tied by the neck.

The smallest of the retriever breeds, we've discovered they're a convenient size for today's more compact living conditions. Canadian Kennel Club standards call for a bitch to be approximately 16.8 to 19.5 kilograms (37 to 43 pounds), with a height of between 46.7 and 48.2 centimetres (18 and 19 inches); a male, approximately 20.4 to 23.1 kilograms (45 to 51 pounds) and no more than 50.8 centimetres (20 inches) in height. This means the dogs fit easily into small vehicles, hotel elevators, tents, and canoes. As a result, they make excellent travelling companions and, given their affable dispositions, are welcomed almost everywhere they go.

Staff at one hotel where we frequently stay, actually looks forward to our dogs' visits. Now when we call for reservations, they will always ask if the Tollers will be with us and, on the rare occasion when they're not, express disappointment.

Tollers have also proven adept at carving new niches for themselves in this fresh millennium. Excellent as photographic lures for anyone wanting to capture waterfowl on film, quick to master obedience trials, hunting tests,



fly ball, and agility competitions they have proven they can meet changing times with a natural flair and ease. Some, like Guinness and Clancy, of Mary Brooks' Whitepoint Kennel in Halifax, have actually gone into show business. Guinness appears in Alexander Keith beer commercials (he even has a speaking part) while Clancy, in his younger days, was a member of the famous Super Dogs, travelling from Nova Scotia to Vancouver with the show. Later he joined the ranks of Tollers that, because of their innate friendliness, have become therapy dogs and visitors to hospitals and nursing homes.

Still, some breeders do not recommend Tollers to first-time dog owners. Because of their sensitivity and high activity levels, the little dogs can sometimes exasperate and even exhaust a novice puppy purchaser. And frustration can lead to harsh and permanently damaging attempts to settle the problem.

"Hitting a dog or yelling at it is wrong for two reasons," Jim Spencer, one of North America's top retriever trainers and field trial judges once told us. "First, it's cruel, and, second, it doesn't work...especially with a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. Use harsh methods with one of them and you'll end up with a dog so sulky it will make a Missouri mule look good."

Affable, clever, versatile, and brimming over with joie de vivre, Nova Scotia's Duck Tolling Retrievers have come a long way from being their province's best-kept secret. These days the pied piper of the marsh is fast becoming one of Nova Scotia's most popular phenomena. And arguably, its best loved. As one long-time Toller owner put it, "The cruellest thing one of these little red dogs can do is die and break your heart."

If you'd like more information on the breed:

- The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever
Alpine Publications, P. O. Box 7027 Loveland, CO 80537 USA, 1996 Co-authored: Gail MacMillan/ Alison Strang
- A Breed Apart
Nimbus Publishing, P. O. Box 9301, Station A. Halifax, NS B3K 5N5 1998
- Gail MacMillan
The Canadian Kennel Club
89 Skyway Avenue, Suite 200, Etobicoke, ON M9W 6R4

There are also a seemingly infinite number of Web sites which may be accessed by simply entering Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers.