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# THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

*To serve, protect, and count California's acorns since 1980*

Volume 25

*The Official Newsletter of the California Acorn Survey*  
Walt Koenig and Jean Knops, co-directors

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Editor: Walt Koenig

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## ARE WE DEAD YET?

No we are not. In fact, we're doing well, all things considered, and the Editors hope you are too. One major reason things have improved from last year is, of course, the vaccines, of which I trust you have all availed yourselves. If not, please feel free to write "I'm a nutbar" on the envelope and put it back in the mail. I'll take you off the mailing list as soon as I receive, disinfect, and quarantine the envelope for two weeks.



*Speaking of getting vaccinated, here I am on Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> in front of Sather Gate and an eerily deserted Sproul Plaza on the Berkeley campus on my way to get my first jab. I never thought I'd miss the Spot Man or the guy selling acres of land on the moon, but neither were anywhere to be seen. Strangely, given the state of the planet, you'd think that land on the moon would be a hot commodity. Yet another casualty of Amazon, I guess.*

Getting vaccinated was undoubtedly the most exciting event of an otherwise largely forgettable 2021, allowing us to get together with at least a few hand-picked friends without the nagging suspicion that they were trying to kill us. Someday in the foreseeable future it's even possible that we may begin to let guests inside *Rancho Searcho-no-Moro* without proof of vaccination and a negative covid test within the prior 72 hours.

*Years from now we will tell our currently nonexistent grandkids about the year we spent hiding out in our living room putting together jigsaw puzzles. Here's Jannie Lou of the Ravishing White Hair gazing with trepidation at part of the puzzle we borrowed from our (former) friends Janice and Edward who claimed it was a lot of fun. Right. It's a good thing we have a big living room and were OK with eating on the back deck for a few months.*



*Our first time having non-virtual people inside our house since the start of the pandemic was dinner with neighbors and old friends Ben and Cate on April 11<sup>th</sup>. Just like before times—we even forewent spraying them with disinfectant and keeping them on the other side of the plexiglass partition we had installed in our dining area after we finally gave up on the jigsaw puzzle.*

First up in our road back to some semblance of normality was a trip east to see Jannie Lou's mum and my bro Bill, both in Naples, Florida, after which we visited friends and F1 Phoebe in Ithaca. Not only did we get on planes (scary!) but we ate at more than one of those "bring you food" places. (Apparently they're called "restaurants"; I'd forgotten.) Most memorably, these included lunch at Dinosaur Barbeque in Syracuse and root beer floats at the Cortland A&W Drive-in on our way to Ithaca. I should mention, to those affected (that would be bro Bill), Janis's mother has finally moved to be near her eldest daughter (Janis's sister) Sandy in Iowa City, which means that next time I show up in Naples, it will be entirely to hassle you.



We're fiercely proud of our Phoebs, who is currently a grad student studying ants at Cornell. And not just any ants—ants of the genus *Temnothorax* that live in acorns. Yes—acorn ants! And not just any acorn ants. Slave-making acorn ants! There are actually two species, one of which raids and enslaves workers of the other. Is that the coolest thing or what? Here she is (above) looking for acorns (and ants) around Beebe Lake on the Cornell campus. Below, she, along with her boyfriend Benjamin, joined me at the totally obscure Edward Babcock Hirshfield Memorial Natural Area for some early morning birding on May 3<sup>rd</sup>.

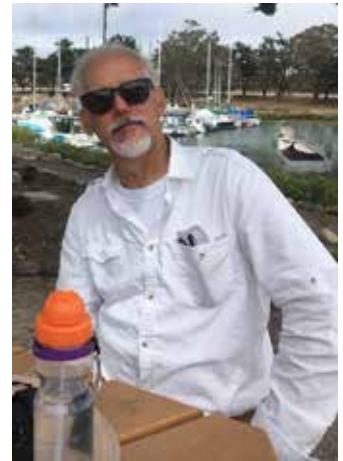


Next was a 4-day raft trip down the Grand Canyon (rescheduled, along with the rest of our lives, from 2020) with my freshman college roommate Robert (barely recovered from last year's survey) and colleague and old friend Paul Sherman from Gold Beach, Oregon. As advertised, it's a very, very big canyon, and hiking down to the river from the south rim made us all feel very, very old.



Paul, Robert, et moi happily oblivious of what the hike down to the Colorado River on the Bright Angel trail was going to do to us. Nothing like descending 4500' on a hot Arizona day to make you realize you're no longer the young stud you thought you were.

Other than doing jigsaw puzzles, I've had three major extracurricular activities during the pandemic. First is a weekly birding trip with Edward Rooks, a great artist and wonderful naturalist, at various sites between his house in San Jose and Rancho Searcho-no-Moro in Carmel Valley. Here he is having lunch at Moss Landing on July 1<sup>st</sup> after birding at Zmudowski State Beach. Look behind you, Edward—that Labrador Duck is thousands of miles outside of its normal range.



My second major activity during the last 20 months has been drinking sparkling rosé during cocktail hour with Jannie Lou of the RWH. A great way to spend a pandemic, in case you're still looking for one. Pour me another glass, please—I seem to be down to my last six.



*Lest anyone think I've forgotten him, here's a photo of FI Dale (along with our completely human friend Chuck Geisler from Ithaca) taken at the top of Half Dome during our totally uneventful backpacking trip in Aug. 2017. (No, we were not abducted by aliens; my shoulder implant is from my covid shot.) I have few more recent photos of Dale as the pandemic foiled our*

*attempt to visit him in spring 2020. Currently he's in Tokyo working for a robotics startup that definitely has nothing to do with a forthcoming alien invasion. In any case, he's mostly spending his time working on his bachata dancing, which he's really good at. Who'da think it?*

*Another pre-acorn counting excursion was a camping trip at Lake Alpine in the Sierras as part of a musical weekend with various locals, including Greg & Mary Martin, Phyllis Conlan & Bob, and a coven of miscellaneous Ingrams. Here we are arriving after our flight to the lake in our new all-electric Tesla swanplane.*



*Yet another excursion was to an acorn survey planning meeting in Basalt, Colorado, hosted by Karen Nardi and Bill Carmen, the California Acorn Survey's General Counsel and Official Gin & Tonic Mixer, respectively. Here they are in their lovely Mill Valley home at the end of the statewide survey on Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>. Thanks guys—we had a great time!*



## THE HASTINGS UPDATE

My third major activity during the pandemic has been spending afternoons at Hastings, where I hang out in my old office pretending to still be an academic, riding my bike up to Cahoon Summit, and generally keeping an old-fart's eye on the place. I'm happy to report that Jen Hunter, Hastings's Grand Poobah, continues to do a great job negotiating the impenetrable ways of UC Berkeley, and that the acorn woodpecker project forges on, with Eric doing his best to run things from his dais in Norfolk, VA. As I have said many times, someone has to work for a living, and so, my sincere thanks to Jen and Eric who are doing so such that I don't have to.

*One of the more notable Hastings events of 2021 took place on July 5<sup>th</sup> when we finally answered the age-old question "how many former acorn woodpecker postdocs does it take to band a baby woodpecker?" Apparently the answer is four. Clockwise from the left: Joey Haydock (1993-2000), Sahas Barve (2017-2021), Eric Walters (2006-2011), and, monopolizing the right side of the photo, moi (1979-1981). Also in the photo to Eric's left is his grad student and the project's first confirmed Ukrainian spy, Oleksii Dubovyk. Say, Olek, you wouldn't happen to have a copy of that Golden Showers video, would you?*



## THE BRING-YOU-FOOD PLACE REVIEW

Last year we avoided all activities during the survey that would have involved interacting with animals trying to kill us; i.e., people. This year we were slightly more adventurous, eating at a small, select number of restaurants during the statewide survey. A very small number. In fact, other than a lunch of hot dogs from Costco and another of burgers from In-and-Out, there were three. Well, actually only two, but I'm going to cheat and include the third anyway.

*Rossoti's Alpine Inn, Portola Valley*

The Alpine Inn has been our go-to place before the Jasper Ridge acorn survey for many years, being a funky dump of a place with crappy bar food, a lot of alcohol, and a decrepit outdoor area in back with a couple of run-down picnic tables where you could eat your overcooked hamburger while fighting off the yellowjackets. In other words, just our kind of place.

Admittedly, being in Portola Valley, it was not difficult to imagine a brighter future. Turns out that future has arrived. On Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>, five of us—Bill & Karen from Mill Valley, Robert & Tania from Los Altos, et moi—met there for lunch when it opened at 11am only to find a packed parking lot and a long line of people waiting to get in.



*Bill and Jean at the Alpine Inn Beer Gardens back in the day (Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003, to be exact). There wasn't a whole lot about the place in those days that seemed in step with the Portola Valley ambiance—certainly not the décor, nor the drunk dogs wearing party hats passed out on the ground, nor the sketchy clientele like the guy ranting about politics behind Bill.*

Fortunately, Robert & Tania had gotten there early enough that we were able to get one of the dozens of tables now spread out luxuriously among the shade trees imported from the Amazonian rain forest. And the food was, well, good; I appreciated that they still have burgers and hot dogs, but they also have pizzas, ribs, pulled pork tacos, and, as proof of their transformation, “summer avocado toast” with feta, pickled red onion, and Meyer lemon zest. It’s not what it used to be, but then again, neither are the rest of us, the difference being that it’s gone upscale while we’ve been heading the opposite direction.

Rating: 🍔 🥑 🥤

*Taco Truck, Hopland*

Yes, I do love those tacos, and have greatly missed them over the past 20 months. One place we’ve scored them regularly is at the corner of 101 and Hwy 175 in Hopland, a town with precious few eateries worthy of the *California Acorn Survey*. Last year no truck was to be seen, but this year we made it there just in time as a food truck, sitting off on its own when we arrived, sped off immediately after Bill and I got our tacos, which were fine—expensive (\$3.25), but they came with a whole jalapeño and a lot of meat, and were a pleasure to eat after a year + of virtually no outside food, including those beloved tacos.

Rating: 🌮 🌮

*Fine dining in Hopland at the end of this year’s survey on Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>.*



*Dinosaur Barbeque, Syracuse, NY*

Ithaca’s 10 square miles of unreality include a small airport that is surprisingly convenient except for the frequency of flights being cancelled due to, well, just about anything. As a result, one is often forced to drive to the larger hubs in Syracuse or Rochester. The good news is that both are home to a Dinosaur Barbeque, a small mostly upstate New York chain of excellent ribs, pulled pork, and brisket that I regularly fantasize will open a new branch somewhere along the route of the *California Acorn Survey*. Jannie Lou and I stopped there on May 1<sup>st</sup> on our way to Ithaca and had the combo plate, which has always made driving to Syracuse worth the effort. For all you vegetarian types, eat your (artichoke) hearts out.

Rating: 🍖 🍖 🍖 🍖

*Dinosaur Barbeque bills itself as “a restaurant, blues venue, and biker bar chain located mostly in upstate New York.” Proving this an apt description, here’s Jannie Lou of the RWH displaying her finest biker pose while waiting for our order on May 1<sup>st</sup>.*



## THE SWIMMING HOLE REVIEW

Jean, the co-editor of the *California Acorn Report*, remains locked up in China where he's busy radio-tracking yaks and soaking up the Chinese cultural experience, which so far has not included acorn counting, at least during the pandemic. In his stead, Bill Carmen kindly agreed to do the survey with me after being only briefly waterboarded.

One of the pleasures of doing the survey with Bill is that he has an inordinate fondness for swimming holes, and encourages indulging in them whenever the opportunity arises. Thus, in lieu of making up reviews of more restaurants we didn't eat at, the Editors have decided to add a new section to the *California Acorn Report* reviewing two of the four swimming holes we visited.

### *South Fork Kaweah River*

After counting acorns on the valley oaks at Kaweah Oaks Preserve east of Visalia, we head to Three Rivers and take South Fork Drive, along which we do blue oaks, interior live oaks, and, a few miles after turning to dirt, canyon live oaks. The road then continues for another mile or so, ending at a campground just inside Sequoia National Park where we spent the night of Sept. 10<sup>th</sup>. Besides a couple of nice hiking trails, the campground boasts the lovely Kaweah River, which we dipped in the next day before moving on. It was the start of a string of most excellent water adventures. Rating: 🏊🏊🏊🏊



*Yours truly taking a respite from the arduous task of counting acorns on Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> in the South Fork of the Kaweah River, a lovely creek teeming with apparently highly social wildlife.*

### *Dye Creek*

Dye Creek Preserve, a TNC site in Tehama County, boasts yet another lovely hiking trail and idyllic creek that was all the more inviting for it being a dry year. After the count, we walked up the trail and located the swimming hole wedged in between debris from the Cascade volcanic arc, affording a picturesque stretch of water for a refreshing afternoon plunge. Rating: 🏊🏊🏊🏊



*Bill in the inviting, yet spooky, dark waters of Dye Creek on Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>. Although lovely, some of the aquatic life was a bit creepy; next time we'll try further up the creek.*

## AND FINALLY, ON TO THE COUNT

If you were thinking I'd never get there, you aren't alone. At long last, however, the count began, starting with our 9<sup>th</sup> year counting acorns on valley oaks in and around Davis with former oak postdoc Ian Pearse, who started this offshoot of the *California Acorn Survey* in 2013 and enthusiastically flew in from his home in Ft. Collins for the event on August 30<sup>th</sup>.



*It's always a treat to get together with Ian to count acorns around Davis in pursuit of answering the question of whether isolation affects acorn production. (Ian says 'way'; I say 'no way'; so far, Ian's winning but the final results are not yet in so feel free to lay your bets. [Bitcoin preferred]) Part of what makes it fun is seeing what's trending each year in the Sacramento Valley. Sunflowers, as shown here, are still fairly popular, but the big player these days is pistachios, acreage of which has increased 56% since 2016.*

## THE ACORN SURVEY; TAKE 2

As should be clear by now, Bill drew the short straw this year (that's my story and I'm sticking to it) and joined me for the statewide survey.

The official beginning was Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> when Bill and I counted at Jasper Ridge after our luncheon at the Alpine Inn. Bill then returned with me to Hastings where we counted—year 42, in case you were keeping score—over the next two days.



*The Hastings survey involves a lot more than just counting acorns: all 250 survey trees have dendrometers to measure for radial growth, the valley oaks are fitted with iButtons with temperature data to download, and, at the end, there are the traditional gin and tonics to drink at Red House, in our dreams if nothing else. In any case, the additional effort required prompts us to rope a couple of unsuspecting helpers, which this year included Maggie Hellier and Mara Cobb, the current intrepid ACWO field assistants. Here we all are on the way up to the Arnold at the start of the Hastings count on Sept. 4<sup>th</sup>.*

As for the acorn crop, just in case you're interested, it's a decidedly mediocre (variable?) year. Of our 42 years of data, valley oaks ranked 22<sup>nd</sup>, black oaks 19<sup>th</sup> and the other three species (blue oaks, canyon live oaks, and coast live oaks), ranked between 27<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> in terms of the mean number of acorns per tree recorded during our 30-second visual counts. In contrast, last year both blue and coast live oaks ranked 6<sup>th</sup> and valley oaks ranked 13<sup>th</sup>, making 2020 a pretty good year. Averaging over all the trees, 2021 ranked 32<sup>nd</sup>, making it comparable to 2019 (ranked 31<sup>st</sup>) but considerably worse than 2020 (ranked 12<sup>th</sup>).

But! We logged at least one *California Acorn Survey* first—a baby coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum*), found by Bill on the lane while walking back near the end of the survey on Sept. 5<sup>th</sup>. Live long and prosper, oh hornèd one!

With the counts at Jasper Ridge and Hastings history, Bill and I set off early on Sept. 6<sup>th</sup>, heading south, first to Pozo and then to the ever serene Sedgwick Reserve. (Well, except for the Caballo fire that

started nearby while we were there, but we'll ignore that.)

Our biggest problem this year was, once again, the National Forest closures. I'm beginning to think that the people in charge of our National Forests are unaware of how inconvenient it is when they close everything during acorn counting season. With five sites on National Forest lands, do they not recognize how critical the *California Acorn Survey* is to national security?

Fortunately, we were able to circumvent the closures, unlike last year. I counted Chews Ridge (Los Padres NF) on my own minutes before it closed on Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, while Bill and I made a special trip to Switzer's in the San Gabriel Mountains on Sept. 29<sup>th</sup> after they finally got around to reopening Angeles NF. We succeeded in accessing our other sites thanks to contacts who were kind enough to accompany us to the site (Liebre Mountain in Angeles NF), provide us with access through their ranch (Pozo in Los Padres NF), or briefly look the other way while we counted our trees (Oak Grove Campground in Cleveland NF). Thanks to you all.

*While I'm on the subject of helpful contacts, a special thanks goes to Vilius Zukauskas, our man in Angeles NF who, except for 2020 when everything went to shit, has unfailingly helped us get up to our black oak site at the top of Liebre Mountain. Vilius is also the only National Forest guy we are aware of whose foot attire consists entirely of flip-flops.*



Of course, the National Forest closures have been prompted by fires and/or the danger of fire, which admittedly has been intense the last couple of years. Yet another site in this category is the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve, which remains closed following fires in 2018 and which we definitely did not count in 2020. This year, however, we succeeded in finagling permission to go into our site as a result of the efforts of Hailey Laskey and Kim Klementowski, both of the Center for Natural Lands Management. Thanks and, as with everyone associated with any of our sites, we'll be in touch about next year's survey sooner than you think.



*For reasons that weren't always clear, we had spare time on the statewide survey despite lollygagging at swimming holes. One site of note that we finally got to was the historic Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno (Yelp's #1 best attraction!). And it was indeed inspirational. (A man, a wheelbarrow, and a dream....) Check it out on one of your next Fresno vacations.*

*Another traditional stop for the survey is Kathryn Purcell and Ken's amazing haybale house in Coarsegold, where our very own sommelier Bill organized a blind gin-and-tonic tasting the evening of Sept.*



*11<sup>th</sup>. The winner? Trader Joe's el-cheapo gin, although we all agreed that the considerably more expensive "The Botanist" would have won if we hadn't been so drunk.*

Back to the acorn crop. We currently survey 55 populations of oaks (species within sites). None did especially well, with the exceptions of valley oaks at Malibu State Park, where we counted an impressive 66.0 acorns per tree, and black oaks at Hopland. Notably poor crops were logged by tanbark oaks in Santa Cruz (Empire Grade) and Santa Barbara (San Marcos Pass)—but not at Chews Ridge; this is a species that rarely produces a bad crop of acorns, presumably because they are, to a greater or lesser extent, insect pollinated (unlike all the real oaks, which are, of course, wind pollinated). Both blue oaks and coast live oaks were generally blah after having excellent crops in 2020. California black oaks were decent to good, although the trees on Liebre Mountain, which are generally notable for their productivity (they hold the all-time record of 105.7 acorns counted per tree in 2001) had one of their relatively rare bad years. All in all, it's at best a highly variable year.

In total, we counted 12,078 acorns compared to 23,815 in 2020 despite failing to get to either Switzer's or the top of Liebre Mountain. The grand total now stands at 581,397 acorns counted since the start of the survey in 1980. Our operators are available 24/7 to take your prediction as to when we'll break 1,000,000; the prize is a FREE one-year subscription to the *California Acorn Report* (nominal \$99 shipping and handling fee applies). Call 1-900-WEC-OUNT; all major credit cards and crypto currencies accepted.

## THE PUBLISH OR PERISH DEPARTMENT

The extent to which we have already or are about to perish may be debatable, but the *California Acorn Survey* continues to publish nonetheless. Its most notable contribution in 2021 was a historical review of masting in a special issue of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* organized by former postdocs Mario and Ian. Among the more interesting things I learned writing the paper was that in *De rerum natura* [On the Nature of Things], a poem written by the Roman philosopher Lucretius in first century B.C., he discusses what appears to have been a common practice prior to the technological advances of shelter and fire: trading sex for acorns. Who knew? No telling how different the *California Acorn Survey* might have been back in the day.



*For once I got a nice portrait of long-time California Acorn Survey supporters Brad (aka "H") and Louise in the courtyard of their retro LA bungalow. I'm pretty sure we've stayed at their house—previously in Davis—every year of the survey (including 2020, when we camped in their backyard) except when they've been unaccountably absent due to the lame excuse of being on sabbatical. Thanks for everything, guys, including and especially the ever-present bottomless popcorn bowl. And while you're up, could you please pour me a couple more glasses of that bubbly?*

## THE WIND DOWN

The 2021 statewide survey came to a glorious end on Sept. 14<sup>th</sup> when I left Bill's house in Mill Valley, drove over the Golden Gate Bridge, and made it back to the sun-drenched upper Carmel Valley at 1:50pm after 2,238 miles of driving. (Well, not quite, as there was still a 600-mile day trip to Switzer's on Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>.) In any case, what do professional acorn counters do to relax after a month of hard-scrabble acorn counting? No, the answer is NOT barter acorns for sex, at least not recently. On the contrary, it's head to Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia!



Although the stated excuse for going to Cape Breton is the music, the real draw is our good friends and acorn-counting trainees Andy Horn and Marty ("Dean") Leonard. Here they are with Jannie Lou (here of the Brown Hat rather than the Ravishing White Hair) on our hike in the Mabou Highlands on Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>.

While we mostly dined at the fabulous Red Shoe Pub in Mabou while in Cape Breton, on the way back to Halifax we had lunch at the Celtic Music Interpretive Centre in Judique, where Jannie Lou of the RWH ordered the tacos. As one might have predicted, they were terrible. The music, however, was great—apparently you can grab any random Cape Bretoner and they're likely to not only play a mean fiddle but be a great piano player and step dancer as well.



Last but not least, I want to give a special call-out to Bill, here posing at Switzer's during the final moments of this year's survey with Moxie, the official guard chihuahua of the California Acorn Survey. Bill is one of the founders of the survey, having done it with Ron Mumme in 1981-1983 while I was either at Occidental College (yes, I did have a real job once, briefly) or pretending I had something more important to do. (Can you believe there was a time when I thought there was something more important in life than counting acorns? Me neither.)

And that's it for the 2021 *California Acorn Report*. See you next year. Our US editorial offices are:  
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*The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is an international organization dedicated to the understanding of acorn production by California oaks, and, incidentally, world domination. Members and years of servitude include*

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-1983)  
 Elizabeth Ross-Hooge, Glacier Bay National Park, AK (1991)  
 Mark Stanback, Davidson, NC (1989-1990, 1992)  
 Jay McEntee, Springfield, MO (2005)  
 Xiaoan Zuo & Wenjin Li, Lanzhou, China (2010)  
 Eric Walters, Norfolk, VA (2006-2010)  
 Maria Dolores Carbonero Muñoz, Pozoblanco, Spain (2013)  
 Kyle Funk, Normal, IL (2018)  
 Mario Pesendorfer, Vienna, Austria (2014-2018)  
 Ian Pearse, Fort Collins, CO (2012-2013, 2015-2019, 2021)  
 Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 1990-92, 1994-98, 2000-2019, 2021)  
 Jean Knops, Suzhou, China (1993-2011, 2013-2017, 2019)  
 Robert Olson, Los Altos, CA (2020)  
 Walt Koenig, Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2021)

*We also wish to thank our dedicated staff:*

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 Phoebe Koenig (*Acorn Ant Specialist*)  
 Jen Hunter (*Grand Poobah, Hastings Reserve*)

*We owe a great debt to the LTREB NSF gave us in 2012, despite threats of a Republican filibuster. Thanks, and to all you hard-working program officers back in Alexandria, Virginia: take the rest of the day off.*