

# THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

Special Pacifier Edition

Volume 27

The Official Newsletter of the California Acorn Survey  
Walt Koenig and Jean Knops, founders

17 October 2023

Editor: Walt Koenig

*(Editor's note: this special issue was written entirely by ChatGPT with instructions to write in the style of the California Acorn Report and include discussions of "kestrel", "grandparent", "pacifier", "college roommate", "okonomiyaki pancakes", "Blue Mountains", "oriole", "fuzzy dice", "wordle", "dilithium crystals", and "truck nuts".)*

## THE ACORN SURVEY BECOMES A GRANDPARENT

It's true; as of last spring we became official Grand Persons in the life of the one (and we suspect only) Kestrel Moraine Koenig, whom we trust is being groomed to take over the *California Acorn Survey*. (We certainly hope so; it's been pointed out to us, perhaps belatedly, that we're on the verge of getting old.) We made our first excursion to Ithaca to meet her in June; in July we met up with the family (Benjamin, Phoebe, and Kestrel) at the Animal Behavior Society meetings in Portland; and we flew east again to check up on Kestrel's acorn counting skills immediately after the *California Acorn Survey* in September. (Frankly, they still need work, but she'll get there.)

Kestrel is, of course, cute as a button. The parents are doing well also and by all accounts appear to be greatly enjoying parenthood. Both gave talks at the ABS meetings: Phoebe on her acorn ants and Benjamin on the AI he's working on trying to interpret the crazy world of Carrion Crows. (Working, coincidentally enough, with our friends and colleagues Vittorio Baglione and Daniela Canestrari of Leon, Spain, whom we visited in 2013.) We suspect Benjamin will discover that the crows are singing "It's a small world after all."



*Congratulations to proud mom Phoebe and baby Kestrel, here shown celebrating this special Pacifier Edition of the California Acorn Report.*



*Congratulations also to dad Benjamin, here introducing Kestrel to climbing at the conclusion of "Free Solo: Skyscraper Edition" in which they were featured. Alex Honnold is still trying to figure out how Benjamin climbed a 60-story skyscraper with only one hand, holding a baby in a snugly, with a pacifier in his mouth. He's got talent, that's for sure.*

As for our other F1, Dale has not yet produced any F2s but makes up for it by continuing to dance up a storm in Tokyo, where we visited in March. Having lived there for 5 years, Dale's a lot of fun to travel with. Along with a couple of nice meals in Tokyo, we took the Shinkansen to Osaka, where we walked the Minami District, sampled takoyaki (fried octopus balls), and had okonomiyaki pancakes at a classic Osakan hole-in-the-wall restaurant.

*Dale and Jannie Lou of the Ravishing White Hair posing below a Osakan takoyaki octopus mascot. Not sure where it got the pacifier, but it suits it, don't you think?*



**IN SEARCH OF THE ELUSIVE AUSTRALIAN ACORNS**

After visiting Dale, we continued on to Australia, first spending a couple of days in Port Douglas, where we snorkeled the Great Barrier Reef, took boat trips on the Mossman River, and marveled at the thousands of metallic starlings roosting downtown. We followed up with a week hiking in the Blue Mountains and sight-seeing in Canberra with our Oz friends Rob and Rosanne and our Nova Scotia friends (conveniently on sabbatical) Andy and Dean Leonard. Acorn-counting was on the light side, unfortunately, but we had a great time and greatly appreciated the hospitality everyone showered on us during the trip. How all those cool birds survive without acorns is still a mystery to me, however.



*Here we are at the end of one of the many forced marches Rob led us on in the fabulous Blue Mountains outside of Sydney. From the lower left: Andy, Rosanne, Dean Leonard, Rob, Jannie Lou of the RWH, et moi. It was challenging looking for a matching set of pacifiers in the town of Blackheath; apparently they hadn't been advised about International Pacifier Week.*



*Here's Andy trailing the pack on one of the memorable trails we took in the Blue Mountains. It took my knees several months to recover from the crazy number of stairs going up and down the sides of the mountains.*

Our trip to Japan and Australia was left over from 2020, when we had originally planned to see Dale in Tokyo and take advantage of Dean Leonard and Andy's (similarly delayed) sabbatical. Having put it off for three years meant that it was soon followed by a trip to Ithaca to see Kestrel and visit our many Ithaca friends including Steve & Natalia, Chuck & Barbara, Jim & Ann, and even our fellow grandparents-in-law Chris & Susan. Great seeing everyone!

*Here's Steve and Natalia during our visit to Ithaca on June 17<sup>th</sup>. Being special, we even let them forego the otherwise obligatory pacifiers we made everyone else wear in honor of Kestrel and this year's California Acorn Report.*



*And here, just because it was so cool, is Steve with a northern oriole that came indoors to say hello during our visit. Nothing like an oriole to cheer up everyone's day!*

*And, because I, as a new proud grandperson, can't resist, here's one more photo of baby Kestrel, this time with Jannie Lou of the RWH. Kestrel's determined gaze is focused on Benjamin, out of view on the left juggling watermelons at their weekly CSA (Community Supported Acorn) pickup in Ithaca.*



## HOME AND HASTINGS

We continue to enjoy life at Rancho Searcho-no-Moro in between counting acorns. Jannie Lou of the RWH works on her fiddling while I go over to Hastings most afternoons to ride my bike and prepare for the next acorn counting season. I also continue to bird with my friend Edward once a week and both Jannie Lou & I get together with neighbors whenever our packed retiree schedules permit.



As always, it's great to get together with Ben & Cate down the hill, who continue to lead the way regarding how and where to take vacations during our busy years of not working. Recently they had scheduled a long trip to Modesto but altruistically changed their plans to report out Italy for us instead. Thanks so much, guys!



And here's pretty much all our other Carmel Valley friends, gathered for a party hosted by Greg and Mary Martin on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. From the left: Susan & Michael Newton, Greg Martin, Roy Mustelier, Jannie Lou of the RWH, Janis's friend Jana (above), Mary Martin (below), Kris Swanson, Allan & Gay Heller, and Bob & Phyllis Conlan. It was nice of them to all patiently listen to me describe the intricacies of acorn counting during dinner. The pacifiers may have helped.

Grand Poobah Jen Hunter continues to do a great job managing Hastings, including organizing a successful Open House on June 10<sup>th</sup> and obtaining funding for a 1/10 scale model of the Golden Gate Bridge currently being built to replace the funky Finch Creek crossing at their house. Here she is, showing where the toll plaza (FastTrak only) near the south tower of the bridge will be located.



Here's Jannie Lou of the Ravishing White Hair at our 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner (coincidentally, the Pacifier Anniversary) Aug. 9<sup>th</sup> at Montrio in Monterey. The sparkling acorn rosé paired surprisingly well with the crab cakes and braised beef short ribs.

Below, 8 years after our fire, is the front yard of Rancho Searcho-no-Moro on one of the many cool summer mornings we had this year. For those of you who haven't yet visited, it's time. I'm talking to you, Tim & Miriam. Also all our friends from Ithaca, Andy & Dean Leonard, Ron and Sarah, and probably the rest of you as well.



## THE ACORN SURVEY SCORES BIG!

Before we dive into this year's survey, we have to brag about having been sent an original set of fuzzy dice from the aptly-named Acorn Fuzzy Dice Corporation. To quote the citation: "We are pleased to congratulate you on the great successes of the *California Acorn Survey*. These are the types of activities that we, at the Acorn Fuzzy Dice Corporation, feel necessary for the promotion of bitter-tasting seeds and the betterment of society. Please accept these acorn fuzzy dice as a token of our gratitude. With just a bit more work counting acorns you may be eligible for a complimentary set of acorn truck nuts."

My congratulations to the entire staff of the *California Acorn Survey*. Please stop by my office at Hastings anytime to squeeze either of these adorable acorn fuzzy dice as a reminder of all your hard work. And please: keep at it! I've always dreamed of having a set of acorn truck nuts.



## SO WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT COUNTING ACORNS, ANYWAY?

It was pointed out to me recently that it's been a long time since I've provided a rationale for the *California Acorn Report*, much less the entire *California Acorn Survey*, beyond the pleasure we obviously get from driving around California eating tacos. To quote a recent journal editor whose review request I was obliged to decline due to the imminent acorn survey: "I completely understand your [totally lame excuse]. Well, as much as anyone can truly understand acorn counting."

So here you go. Once upon a time I studied acorn woodpeckers. By a remarkable coincidence, acorn woodpeckers store (and eat) acorns. It so happens that the acorn crop varies a lot from year to year (they are "masting" species), and a lot of things about acorn

woodpeckers—most obviously their general well-being—is dependent on the size of the acorn crop.

Since the acorn crop clearly affected the woodpeckers, Ron Mumme (a lowly grad student at the time), and moi (a slightly less lowly postdoc) decided to survey the acorn crop starting in 1980, following (more or less) a protocol I heard at the First California Oak Symposium in fall 1978. Marking 250 individual trees divided among the five common species at Hastings, we scored the acorn crop of the trees from a scale of 0 to 4 and counted as many acorns as we could using binoculars for 15s each (30s total). The 0 to 4 scale eventually faded into obscurity, while the 30s visual count is now a standard in the international acorn-counting military-industrial community.

Masting is the synchronous, highly-variable seed production of a population of plants. But how big a "population" are we talking about? A km or two? Monterey County? California? Earth? The solar system? The Andromeda galaxy? After several false starts, Jean Knops talked me into organizing the first-ever statewide *California Acorn Survey* in 1994 to find out. It now comprises over 1000 trees of 9 species at 26 sites around the state and takes about 12 days to conduct. The data we collect is stored in a secret underground vault in a Nevada salt mine after being randomized to remove all intelligible information.

And what do we do with these data? Partly the usual: cure cancer; resolve the origin of the universe; raise the dead—not necessarily in that order. More seriously, we do our best to demonstrate the many ways that acorns drive the world's ecosystems. For this year's contributions, see the Publish or Perish Department on p. 8.

*Here I am, analyzing data wearing my special data analysis eyeglasses and umbrella hat to maximize efficiency of our state-of-the-art computing facilities. It's the pacifier that REALLY turbocharges everything, however.*



## THE 2023 CALIFORNIA ACORN SURVEY

As is traditional, the *California Acorn Survey* started off with a day trip on Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> to meet Ian Pearse and conduct our survey of valley oaks in and around the ag fields of Davis. This is always a fun trip as we drive around the area sussing out what crops are trending. (Invest in pistachio futures. You heard it here first.) This was possibly the last year for that project; with 10 years of data, Ian is now charged with answering whether more isolated trees have smaller acorn crops, presumably due to reduced pollen availability.

*The 2023 Acorn Survey kicked off on Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> with a day trip to Davis checking out the valley oaks*



*and looking at what crops are big this year in the Sacramento Valley. To celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the project, Ian brought his whole family, including spouse Jill Baty and their three sons Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Also tagging along on my left was Tomika Hagiwara, visiting from Akiko Satake's lab in Japan. Hi Akiko!*

After a day to recover from the Davis trip, we had the traditional pre-Jasper Ridge Acorn Survey lunch on Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> at the now upscale Alpine Inn in Portola Valley. We are, as should by now be obvious, all about tradition here at the *California Acorn Survey*.



*Moi, Robert's friend Kirby, Robert, Bill, and Karen at the Alpine Inn drinking up in preparation for this year's survey.*

After lunch, it was off to Jasper Ridge and the count. There, after crossing Searsville Dam on the way up to the serpentine area, we suffered our first casualty. As reported shortly afterwards by a still wildly delusional Bill: "These two guys asked me if I wanted to count acorns...I walked out on the trail with them and the next thing I knew I was unconscious. They apparently attacked me and left me lying in the dirt. It was amazing I made it back to get help." Robert and my slight modification to Bill's account is that after he scared the shit out of us by fainting and falling on the side of the road into a gooseberry bush (we suspect heat stroke), Bill was eventually rescued by spouse Karen, who took him home to recover rather than go on the statewide survey where he would no doubt have spent his time wondering why he was counting acorns with two gila monsters.

*Bill, calmed by the pacifier we gave him, after being "attacked" (by vertigo and heat, apparently) at Jasper Ridge. He's now recovered and should be ready for next year's survey, assuming he's learned how to work his new REI mountain walker.*



With Bill out of commission, it was left to Robert and me to finish up and drive back to Rancho Searcho-no-Moro. Joined by Chi Wei, a grad student of Eric's from Old Dominion who was doing some high-tech visualizations of our Hastings survey oaks (not sure why, but hopefully she'll figure out a reason eventually) we devoted the next couple of days to the Hastings survey—year 44, in case you're keeping track.

*Robert and Chi pose during Hastings Survey. Chi was instrumental reading the dendrometers and recording data, while Robert reprised his 2020 prize-winning role of Associate Acorn Counter.*



## AND NOW FOR THE REST OF THE SURVEY

We counted acorns. A few, anyway. It's certainly not a great year, except for a few species in a few sites. (The valley oaks at Malibu Creek State Park, for example, are doing great; black oaks, for the most part, not so much.) At Hastings, for example, we counted a grand total of 991 acorns, which makes it the worst year overall since 2003. Notably bad were coast live oaks (worst year since 2013), but none of the five species did particularly well. Elsewhere, black oaks registered big zeros at three sites (Liebre Mountain, the James Reserve, and Paynes Creek in Tehama County), while interior live oaks at Kaweah River also bombed out. On the other hand, excellent crops were produced by black oaks on Palomar Mountain, coast live oaks at Malibu Creek State Park, and the blue oaks on Liebre Mountain. A pattern? Heck if I know. Somebody *really* needs to study this stuff someday.

A highlight? It would have to be the dipper in Clear Creek at Tower House. You want more details? Check out the 36-page Appendix for those of you who have signed up for Premium subscriptions. Or write and ask. After all, this is the *California Acorn Report*, NOT our companion newsletter the *California Acorn Count Report*.

I do, however, want to give special acknowledgments to Brad & Louise, who hosted us in LA on the second night of the survey, and to Kathryn & Ken, who put us up in their fabulous haybale house in Coarsegold. Also to Steve Sinton, the owner of Avenales Ranch, for granting us permission to get to the American Canyon Campground after we belatedly discovered that the road through his ranch to the National Forest was closed.

*It was a wet winter, evident at several of our survey sites. Here, for example, at Kaweah Oaks Reserve in Visalia, there was water—a lot of it—for the first time in memory. Rainfall does not translate into a good acorn crop, however: we counted exactly 0 acorns there. So much for those acorn truck nuts I was hoping for.*



*Brad serving his legendary acorn mush breakfast to Robert and Louise in their retro LA bungalow Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. It's great that Brad moved to LA just when it was no longer possible to crash at my mother's house in Granada Hills.*

*Edward Rooks continues to play an important role in my post-academic life, joining me once a week to do something other than count acorns. Just in case he got called to go on the survey, he spent his time at Fort Ord National Monument on Aug. 3<sup>rd</sup> practicing his acorn-counting technique. (Ah...Edward...that's a eucalyptus, not an oak...)*



Lastly I thank Robert (my freshman college roommate), co-counter on this year's survey. Robert accompanied me on the survey in 2020, agreeing to come literally at the last minute. He was the survey's understudy in 2021 and 2022 and was again called up this year when Bill bit the dust at Jasper Ridge.

*Here's Robert during our Yosemite acorn count on Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>. Robert's career was in tech, where, among other things, he started Wine.com (originally VirtualAcorns.com) with his brother-in-law Peter back in the heady dot com days. It was no doubt all those corks that prepared him for a future post-career in acorn counting.*



*Acorn counting is rigorous work, and it's critical that we relax at the end of each grueling day. For me, that means solving the day's Wordle. Here I am at Dye Creek Reserve trying to figure out what 5-letter word starts with A, ends with N, and has an O and an R somewhere in the middle. APRON, perhaps?*



### THE RESTAURANT REVIEW

Although we didn't eat out much this year (not even lunch at In-N-Out Burger or Costco, Robert inexplicably balking at both), we still have several restaurants worth discussing.

#### *No-name popup taqueria, somewhere in LA*

As usual, we stayed at Chez Brad & Louise in LA the night we were in the area. For dinner, we availed ourselves of the popup taqueria just down the block, where Robert and I got burritos that lasted us the next couple of nights. (Hopefully it wasn't part of a conglomerate of popup taquerias throughout the LA area; Brad eschews chains of all sorts.). If you run across it, don't pass it up. Walking up to it at night, it looks like the kind of place one can imagine rises out of the mists of the city only one day every 100 years.



*LA no-name popup taqueria. I'm generally a taco guy, but it's hard to find good acorn burritos, and the ones here were great.*

#### *The Red Dot Vegetarian Kitchen, Frazier Park*

After camping at Liebre Mountain the night of Sept. 12<sup>th</sup> we went in search of breakfast the next morning in Frazier Park. There we came across the Red Dot Vegetarian Kitchen, where the lady who watched us park seemed genuinely shocked that she might have customers. As it happened, we didn't stay—the food preparation time was too long for our busy counting schedule—but it was still the most interesting restaurant we've ever (not) eaten at during the *California Acorn Survey*. To quote from their web site: "The Red Dot is not a restaurant...it's a state of consciousness. None can own it. It can only be experienced. It is not a place or a thing. Whoever feels to express the Highest Truth, whoever feels to give True Service from the heart to Humanity, whoever yearns to experience Universal Love, whoever strives and works to manifest Beauty, Perfection and Harmony everywhere in everything, and in every situation, these humble beings are the ones who not only own but ARE The Red Dot." An impressive business plan for a restaurant hidden in an obscure California mountain community, whether it was written by ChatGPT or not.

#### *Omakase by Korami, 400 W. 50<sup>th</sup> St, NY*

Our dinner here with Jannie Lou's sister Laurie and her spouse Cate on Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup> wasn't exactly during the survey but was pretty close and definitely a notable experience. Despite our trips to Japan to visit Dale, we had never eaten at an omakase restaurant, which involves sitting down and having the sushi chef serve you whatever they happen to feel like giving you. (Acorn sushi? Bring it on!) In any case, it was amazing. And not cheap. But worth every yen.

*Moi, Jannie Lou of the RWH, Laurie, and Cate prepare to be wowed by the omakase dinner Cate found for us in NYC*



*during our brief post-survey visit to Ithaca and the Dickinson Homeland of Port Washington on Long Island.*



*We only camped out three nights during the survey, in part because I lost a key component of my stove at Palomar Mountain State Park, limiting my legendary camp culinary magic. Fortunately, there's now a propane firepit at Sierra Foothills, which made it possible for me to cook acorn fried rice for dinner on Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>. (Not the greatest; I really*

*should have shelled those acorns first.)*

## ACORNS: THE FINAL FRONTIER

I'm hardly a big Twitter (X) user, but the following "tweet" was recently brought to my attention. (Better late than never.) By the way, please don't confuse The Editor of *The California Acorn Report* with the former crewmate of the USS Enterprise, Ensign Pavel Chekov, who believes that climate change will be solved once we stop wasting our time trying to figure out cold fusion and instead start controlling matter-antimatter reactions using dilithium crystals.



*Squirrels? Where did he get the idea that I study squirrels? Perhaps in the Delta Quadrant?*

## THE PUBLISH OR PERISH DEPARTMENT

Why I continue to publish long after having academically perished is beyond me. But there were two acorn-related publications since last year's report. One tested whether the acorn crop is the driver of the highly variable varied thrush winter abundance (no); the other looked at whether periodical cicada emergences are affected by the local acorn crop (yes). If you're nerdy enough to want more details, you can track them down on Google Acorn.

And that's it for the 2023 *California Acorn Report*  
Our US editorial offices are:  
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*The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is an international cabal dedicated to counting California's acorns, consuming great tacos, and world domination, not necessarily in that order. 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)  
Xiaoran 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)  
Robert Olson, Los Altos, CA (2020, 2023)  
Ian Pearse, Fort Collins, CO (2012-2013, 2015-2019, 2021-2023)  
Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 1990-92, 1994-98, 2000-2019, 2021-2023)  
Jean Knops, Suzhou, China (1993-2011, 2013-2017, 2019)  
Walt Koenig, Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2023)

*We also wish to thank our dedicated staff:*

Janis Lou Dickinson (*Senior Copy Editor*)  
Tamara Kaup (*Chief Operations Officer, Suzhou Division*)  
Karen Nardi (*General Counsel*)  
Dale Koenig (*Bachata Dance Specialist*)  
Phoebe Koenig (*Acorn Ant Specialist*)  
Jennifer Hunter (*Great and Glorious Leader, Hastings Reservation*)



*This issue is dedicated to the memory of Tania Granoff, long-time friend, California Acorn Survey librarian, and Robert's partner of 50 years, whom we lost last July. Tania, along with Robert, hosted us innumerable times over the years at their home in Los Altos and was the person who introduced me to Carmel Valley, where she grew up. We all miss her—a lot.*