
THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

Going to Hell in a Handbasket Edition

Volume 28

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

2 October 2024

Editor: Walt Koenig

ANOTHER HARD SCRABBLE YEAR

Yes, as retirees, it's been tough and full of difficult first-world problems. Do we drink Trader Joe's North Coast Rosé bubbly tonight or go all out with Mumm's Napa? Should we sit on the cooler north side of Rancho Searcho-no-Moro or the warmer deck on the south side? Painful choices, but they have to be made, (one goddam perfect) day after (another goddam perfect) day. Sometimes I have no idea how we manage. And then all of a sudden it's autumn, and time to count acorns. Brutal. Could you please pass me another glass of sparkling rosé while you're up...?

So maybe it hasn't been *that* bad. Then again, I'm writing this before Nov. 5th, so while it's looking reasonably promising, I wouldn't start shorting your stock in *gianthandbaskets.com* quite yet. We can only hope that The Turd, flushed Nov. 3rd in 2020, will stay down in the sewer where he belongs.

But I digress. It's been a quiet year in the sun-drenched upper Carmel Valley. Starting with Thanksgiving in McKinleyville with our friends Paul Sherman and Julie, we enjoyed Christmas with our kids, granddaughter (now 1½!), and good friends Ben and Cate. Ho ho ho!!!



Jannie Lou (of the ravishing white hair), Phoebe, baby Kestrel, son-in-law Ben, & moi in the front yard of Rancho Searcho-no-Moro waiting for Santa to arrive.



And yes, we still have both a son and, despite my best efforts, a dog. Here's Dale, recovering from the long flight from Tokyo, and Beezle, who spends most of her time recovering from life, resting up before another hard scrabble Christmas dinner, this year an all-Indian food extravaganza.

Shortly after Christmas I spent a week in Munich thanks to the Max Plank Society where I finally had the opportunity to visit Seewiesen—made famous by the work of Konrad Lorenz—as a guest of our good friend Bart Kempnaers. I have to say: those people know how to have a good time, as well as doing fabulously interesting work. On one notable evening Bart's entire lab went into the big city to spend an evening playing *Eisstökschiessen*, a German version of curling in which a weighted "stone" (*Eisstöcke*) is heaved as close as possible to the "small target" (*Daube*) on a weathered and not entirely smooth track. Drinking a lot of warm hard cider beforehand helps considerably.

The tricky part of throwing those Eisstöcke is that they each differ in heft and friction. After heaving one as hard as possible and having it go halfway to the Daube, the next one, thrown just as hard, may very well smash into the back wall at 60 mph.



WHERE GOETH THE SUN?

After the excitement of Christmas, we settled back into our normal routine of Jannie Lou fiddling and me going birding with Edward once a week, only to find ourselves back in Ithaca in early April to check in on our granddaughter and various friends and colleagues.

Edward Rooks, my birding buddy, is also a fabulous artist. After a day of seeing Townsend's warblers (now potentially to be renamed by the AOS as something along the lines of "the Greenish White-wing-barred Yellow-chinned Warbler") at Pinnacles National Park in February, Edward agreed to paint one for us before its name is ignominiously stripped away. His lovely painting, below, now resides in our kitchen, reminding us what the landscape looks like immediately outside our windows.



Coincidentally, early April was the last of the much-anticipated 21st century North American solar eclipses. After going to Oregon where we had an excellent look at the August 2017 eclipse, we figured we would take our chances this time in upstate New York while visiting friends and relations. I can't say as the clouds cooperated, but we had a great time anyway at Shackelton Point—Janis's old field site on Oneida Lake—watching what we could of the eclipse with our friends Chuck Geisler and Steve Emlen.



Chuck trying to convince the sun-god to come back as darkness fell mid-afternoon at Shackelton Point during the April 8th solar eclipse.

Also in April, Jannie Lou's sister Laurie (on the left) and her wife Cate (on the right) were kind enough to come visit to help us ring our front bell expressing our joint faith in gratitude, compassion, patience, and, most importantly, more sparkling rosé.



OU LA LA! BEAUCOUP DE VOYAGES!

As long-time subscribers know, we often gear up for the forthcoming acorn-counting season by traveling to various far-flung parts of the globe. This year we engaged in two such excursions. First, we joined Robert, my freshman college roommate and acorn-counting alumnus from 2020 and 2023, and his friend Kirby for two weeks in Paris where we had a great time seeing the sights, eating fabulous food, and, needless to say (but I will anyway), drinking our way through at least a balthazar of French sparkling wine. *C'était merveilleux!* We were even there long enough for me to regret never having learned enough French to ask for *fromage de chèvre* instead of *fromage de chevaux*. (Both are good, fortunately.)

Robert and Kirby on the deck of our very nice Airbnb in Paris wondering whether there's another bottle of champagne to drink. I never did figure out what that big metal sculpture was off in the distance, but it was admittedly quite pretty when it was lit up in the evening.



Jannie Lou of the RWH in front of Chez L'Ami Jean the last day we were in Paris, reprising the lunch we had there with Dale and Phoebe when we celebrated my retirement in 2016. It

was fabulous and made me finally appreciate why some people plan trips to Paris entirely around eating.



Jannie Lou picking out a super yacht in Monaco to sail up to Robert and Kirby in Paris. Choosing one was almost as difficult as figuring out how to knock off the Russian oligarch owner.

The second trip we took leading up to the acorn survey started with a stop, once again, in Ithaca, where Phoebe defended her thesis to become the latest Dr. Koenig in the family. (The only laggard left is Kestrel, but, being only 1½, I suppose I'm obliged to give her a pass for another couple of years. Nonetheless, better start thinking about it, kiddo)

It was an exciting event indeed! Here's Phoebe (in the middle) after her defense, along with her fabulous major prof Corrie Moreau



(the one on the right) and Kestrel (the one drooling over the celebratory cake on the left). Good job, Phoebs! Take the rest of the day off!

Speaking of which, Phoebe has now left 'gorges' Ithaca and is currently an Alaska State Sea Grant Fellow in Juneau, Alaska, having driven up the Alcan Highway in a truly epic journey with Benjamin and Kestrel. We look forward to visiting, especially if we can reprise our 2019 acorn-counting trip on the Alaska Ferry from Bellingham to get there.

Having successfully seen Phoebe finish up her graduate school career, we headed to St. John's, Newfoundland, where we met with our good friends Andy and Marty (aka Dean Leonard) for a week experiencing what it's like to be in a place whose time zone is ½ hour off kilter from everywhere else in the world. Enough to make one dizzy, if not completely discombobulated.

Once we recovered, however, we had a great time exploring the area, and even had surprisingly decent weather when we went out to Cape Spear, took a boat trip to the puffin colony in Witless Bay, and drove to Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve, home of one heck of a Northern Gannet colony.



Jannie Lou, Dean Leonard, Andy, et moi near St. John's. It's a dramatic place, even if the acorns are regrettably sparse.

One of the trip's highlights was a dinner party hosted by Newfoundland colleague Ted Miller featuring seal stew so good it made me want to order my own personalized club from Amazon. From the right: Bill Montevecchi, Ted, Andy, Dean Leonard, Jannie Lou of the RWH, Ted's wife Margarita, former grad student Johanna Bosch, and Bill's wife Janet. Many thanks, Ted!



The one additional trip we took prior to the survey was to LA, where we met up with Bill—now finally recovered from the 2023 acorn survey—and California Acorn Survey General Counsel Karen Nardi to attend the "Outlaw Fest" at the Hollywood Bowl with a bunch of apparently famous performers, a couple of whom were old farts like us and thus guys we had heard of. However, being a Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Simon & Garfunkel fan myself (none of whom were on the agenda, unfortunately), my main interest was in seeing Bill & Karen and experiencing the Hollywood Bowl. With it being yet another goddam perfect California evening, both were good fun.

Bill and Karen at the Hollywood Bowl on July 31st. Bill only recently had surgery to recover from the grueling 2023 acorn survey, which I now admit has the potential to kill us all one of these years. Good thing we're tough.



Ron had a few difficulties distinguishing acorn woodpeckers from other Hastings denizens when he arrived, but eventually figured out that woodpeckers were the ones that laughed

when you pretended to understand what they heck they were doing.



(Above) Ron quickly became an integral part of the acorn woodpecker project, which by 1980 had expanded to the memorable field crew of Gwen Moore, Sandy Nishimura, Nancy Joste, moi, and Ron, here in a historic photo showing off our matching spotting scopes by the (not yet moved) Hastings chicken coop.



(Right) Ron sporting his (mercifully brief) Ted Kaczynski look while contemplating the writing of his Ph.D. manifesto that (fortunately) focused on acorn woodpecker behavior rather than the future of the industrial society.



A portrait of a far less menacing Ron as he headed off to do his classic study of preening behavior of the pigeon.



Jannie Lou of the Ravishing White Hair and Elvis's ghost outside the Hipster Hotel (not its real name, even if it should be) in Hollywood as we left the day after the Outlaw Fest at the Hollywood Bowl. She looks great, does she not? A lot better than that Elvis guy.

THE ACORN SURVEY I: MUMMEFEST 2024!

All this was but a prelude to the main event. And a special occasion it was, as Ron Mumme, co-founder of the original 1980 acorn survey and recent retiree from Allegheny College in lovely Meadville, PA, flew in on August 26th for the 46th annual Hastings acorn survey and 30th annual statewide *California Acorn Survey*.

Before discussing the acorn survey itself, however, Ron's presence warrants a special retrospective section of the *California Acorn Report* looking at his early days at Hastings.

Ron came from Florida, where the details of his career are hazy (to me, anyway), although I seem to recall that he spent several years trying to unsuccessfully train the mechanical parrots in Disneyworld's enchanted Tiki Room. In any case, he came to Berkeley in 1979 to work on acorn woodpeckers as a Frank Pitelka student while I was still at Hastings as a postdoc.

In the process of digging out my old slides of Ron I ran across this vintage photo I can't help but include of Ron, Frank Pitelka (in the middle), and John Davis (on the right) during an outing we took to Fort Hunter Liggett back in the day. John was the Research Zoologist at Hastings at the time and the guy who's job I was lucky enough to snag after he retired in 1981.



And, as one more trip down memory lane, here's Ron refining his palate on what back in those days we considered the pinnacle of fine libations: Bulmer's woodpecker cider.



Moro on August 26th with the current beverage of choice: Trader Joe's North Coast Reserve Brut Rosé.

Zooming ahead some 40+ years, here's Ron with Jannie Lou of the RWH gearing up for this year's acorn count at Rancho Searcho-no-

And finally, a portrait of Ron, not as a young man but as a distinguished ornithologist (winner of the 2024 Margaret Morse Nice Award; way to go Ron!) and veteran acorn counter who got the whole shebang going with me in the fall of 1980. It was great having him help do the survey again after a mere 41 years frittering his time away doing that 'work' thing.



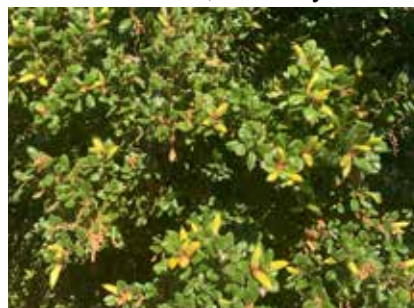
THE ACORN SURVEY II: LET THE COUNT BEGIN!

The hardest part of doing the Hastings survey was the absence of any field assistants, ACWO or otherwise, which meant that, for the first time in memory, the two of us had to do it all: measure and fix all dendrometers, read and replace defective iButtons, count the acorns, and, hardest of all, remember where we'd already been and where we needed to go next. That's my excuse, anyway, for why it took us four days to do the Hastings survey instead of completing it in 1½ days, as we have often done in the past. It was also quite hot, but that's not unusual for that time of year. In any case, I'm positive it had nothing to do with us getting old, although I admit that getting up Haystack Hill with my walker took a lot longer than I anticipated.

In any case, it's a good year for acorns; the best overall, in fact, since 2007, and particularly good for blue oaks (best year since 1985) and coast live oaks (best year since 2011). Although setting no records, valley oaks and canyon live oaks are doing reasonably well also; the only ones not keeping up the pace at

Hastings this year are the black oak, which, unlike elsewhere in the state, were pretty marginal.

Acorns, acorns, acorns! A coast live oak showing off its abundant 2024 wares.



The big day came on Monday, Sept. 2nd, when we loaded up the Honda Odyssey and headed north (clockwise!) for the statewide survey. This was the first time we'd started *on* Labor Day rather than immediately (or soon) after, and as a result, instead of spending hours slogging our way through commuter traffic to get through Morgan Hill and San Jose we zipped right up to Jasper Ridge with hardly any delay at all. (Later in the survey, it also meant that we were in LA on the weekend, which cut down on traffic issues there as well.) I have no idea why starting a day earlier never previously occurred to me.



Ron et moi at Searsville Lake. The lake, formed in 1892 by the construction of Searsville Dam, was a popular local recreation site until 1975 when Stanford kicked out the sunworshippers and formed Jasper Ridge Acorn Counting Preserve. It took a long time after that for the Powers that Be to figure out what to do with the lake, which is 90% filled with sediment. A restoration plan is now in the works and we understand the area behind us will have a Costco, Trader Joe's, and a good taqueria by the 2025 survey, saving us a lot of time searching for them in Palo Alto.



Although the recent Park Fire left parts of it looking strikingly like a Martian landscape, the acorn crop at Dye Creek Reserve was pretty good,

with all three species (valley, blue, and interior live oak) producing decent crops of acorns. Hard to tell from this angle.



Brad showing off one of his award-winning bowls of popcorn at Chez Brad & Louise in LA, where we were lucky enough to get reservations both nights we were in SoCal.

Ron and I aren't the only ones who have changed over the years; here's Brad when he was much younger (and a lot smaller, apparently) showing off a snake during a trip to Mexico I accompanied him. on part of in 1979



One of Ron's many talents is that of a caipirinha mixer, an expertise we exploited shamelessly during our annual stay at Kathryn Purcell and her partner Ken's fabulous haybale house near San Joaquin Experiment Station on Sept. 5th. Here's Ron contemplating muddling limes for the first round of drinks.



In honor of Bill, who never let a good swimming hole pass him by, Ron and I dipped in the waters at Dye Creek and hiked to the incomparable 'Rock Pool' at Malibu Creek State Park, shown here. We had to pass up a swim at South Fork Campground in Sequoia National Park (where a mysterious cave awaits us!) due to the Coffee Pot Fire.





Ron posing in front of one of our favorite locales on the survey, the Pozo Saloon inland from Santa Margarita. Although the timing of the survey avoided a lot of traffic, it also meant that the saloon, open only during the Age of Aquarius when the moon is in the Seventh House and Jupiter aligns with Mars, was closed. Next year, perhaps?

Another site impacted by fire (this time the Lake Fire) was Sedgwick Reserve. Always on top of the latest safety measures, Ron and I donned the hard hats we were given there to protect us against what we assumed were giant falling acorns.



THE ACORN SURVEY III: WE CAME; WE COUNTED

All in all, it is indeed a good year. In total, Ron and I counted 31,088 acorns during our 30s visual counts of 1,060 trees, which is the most acorns counted in a survey in 15+ years. Not bad for a couple of septuagenarians, if I do say so myself. (It brings our alltime total acorn count to 637,395, in case you were keeping track.) The only two comparably good years were 2007 and 2000, during each of which we counted 33,000+ acorns on the survey.

In terms of individual species, the big winners were blue oaks (best year since 2007), coast live oaks (best year since 1996) and black oaks (best year ever, despite Hastings' poor showing); other species were fair to moderate. In terms of sites, the big winner overall was Liebre Mountain, where the mean number

of acorns counted per tree broke all previous records and put the site in running for the National Acorn Championship.

It was great, if a bit exhausting, having to *count* so many acorns, since one keeps running out of fingers. Quantifying this thought, I looked at annual variation in the proportion of trees on which we counted zero acorns, a value that averages 38.5% and has been as high as 60.0% [in 2014]. This year we counted no acorns on 177 of 1060 trees (16.7%), which is the smallest proportion since 1994, when we failed to count any acorns on 133 of 881 trees (15.1%).

THE ANNUAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

I realize that the number of readers interested in the acorn crop is much smaller than those interested in where they should go for good tacos. So here we go. This year we ate at three establishments worthy of your consideration.

Quesadilla Gorilla, 215 W. Main St., Visalia

Bill and I first ran across *Quesadilla Gorilla* in 2022 when it was a guy standing behind a podium on a sidewalk in Visalia hawking quesadillas. It's come a long way since then, now occupying a fancy storefront on Main St. with tables and everything. The good news is that the quesadillas are still great. Ron had the "Evan Boling" (apparently a local barber) with cilantro lime chicken, bacon, jalapeños, and cheese; I had "the Classic" with pork chile verde, rice & black beans, and cheese. Add sauces (cilantro cream; avocado; roasted sour cream; etc.) and one of their quesadillas is an excellent lunch *and* dinner. [Note to Brad: Quesadilla Gorilla is a San Joaquin chain with 5 locations; I recommend you bend your dumbass injunction against chains with more than 3 locations and try one anyway.] 🌮🌮🌮🌮

Ron guarding his Evan Boling quesadilla from prospective poachers on Sept. 6th.



The Bucket, 4541 Eagle Rock Blvd., Los Angeles

The Bucket is a classic Eagle Rock landmark to which I (apparently) took Ron when he visited me during the year I was at Occidental College in 1981-82. I'd been back only once, on the 2012 acorn survey when Bill, Ian, and I ate there. After Ron reminded me of it on Sept. 7th, we decided to check out how the place was faring. And the answer is: not too badly. One now orders at an electronic kiosk, seating is entirely at the attached patio, and they serve burritos as well as burgers. Julio, the irascible owner in 1982, is long gone, but lives on in the "Julio Burger" which Ron ordered and liked, although it looked to me as though it needed far more garlic aioli to be faithful to Julio's memory. (Julio used to dump buckets of the stuff on his burgers.) Meanwhile, my "Bucket Pastrami Burger" was a surprisingly tasty combination. All in all, worth the trip to downtown Eagle Rock. 🌮🌮🌮

Yours truly at The Bucket on Sept. 7th. The original sign (from 1935?), still extant when we were there in 2012, is gone and the surrounding area is built up, but the "lunch bucket"-shaped building survives.



Here it is back in 1982 when Julio was still there and seating (such as it were) was inside the lilliputian main building.



La Super-Rica, 622 N. Milpas, Santa Barbara

So there we are on the way to Sedgwick Reserve thinking about lunch when Ron writes to a colleague from Allegheny College who used to live in Santa Barbara. She immediately writes back saying that if we find ourselves on Milpas Street (which we happened to be on at the time) we should check out *La Super-Rica*. And she was right; it was not only excellent, but *interesting*. As much as I love taquerias, most have pretty standard stuff; you know, carne asada and carnitas tacos on a couple of store-bought corn tortillas with some chopped onions and cilantro. *La Super-Rica* has good tacos—Ron got three—but they

also have unique dishes, including my "taco de rajas" (grilled pasilla peppers, onions, and cheese on two corn tortillas); they also make their own tortillas right there in the store. It was great. We are, as it happens, not the first to discover this place; apparently it was a favorite of Julia Child when she was working on her classic *The Art of The Mexican Taco*. 🌮🌮🌮🌮



Jannie Lou of the RWH and our good friend Nina, who came down from Berkeley to keep her company during the survey, begging for

acorn tacos. Sorry girls; you'll just have to come with us next year.

And that's it for the 2024 *California Acorn Report*

Our US editorial office remains:

Hastings Reservation, 38601 E. Carmel Valley Rd.,
Carmel Valley, CA 93924 (wicker@berkeley.edu)

SPECIAL NOTE TO YOU OLD FART RETIREES: email (or snail mail) me your HOME address; we all know you don't want to go into your old office to get the *California Acorn Report*. (I'm talking to YOU, Mark, Bob, Jeff, Fran, Mary, & Steve.)

Ditto for any of you who have moved, or are about to. Copies of the CAR returned by the USPS are passed on to one of the many thousands on the coveted subscriber waiting list.

The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is an international cabal dedicated to counting California's acorns, consuming great tacos, and world domination. Members and years of servitude include

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-1983, 2024)
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)
Robert Olson, Los Altos, CA (2020, 2023)
Ian Pearce, 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, 1984-2024)

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 Instructor*)
Phoebe Koenig (*Acorn Ant Specialist*)
Jennifer Hunter (*Great and Glorious Leader, Hastings Reserve*)