
THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

Desperately trying to keep it together while counting acorns since 1980

Volume 24

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

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Editor: Walt Koenig

GIVE ME A BREAK

Could you have dreamed up a more screwed-up year in your worst nightmares? No, I thought not. Alright, the Zombie Apocalypse has not descended upon us yet (I think), but at this point it would not surprise me in the least. Heck, it might barely make the evening news. (Is there still evening news? I wouldn't actually know, not having had a television since ours was stolen in 1967 from our basement apartment when I was a junior in high school.) But here we are, for better or for worse (mostly the latter). And not only is it acorn season, there are even acorns to count.

There is other good (or at least not terrible) news. Despite being at the confluence of the Carmel and River fires in August, our house (Rancho Searcho-no-Moro) did not burn down again, as it did in 2015. The River fire did burn Red Hill and much of Madrone Canyon on Hastings, but was successfully stopped before damaging any structures. Meanwhile, the Dolan fire continues to burn in Los Padres National Forest south of us, but has not advanced much for some time and no longer appears to be a significant threat, at least to Hastings or Rancho Searcho-no-Moro.

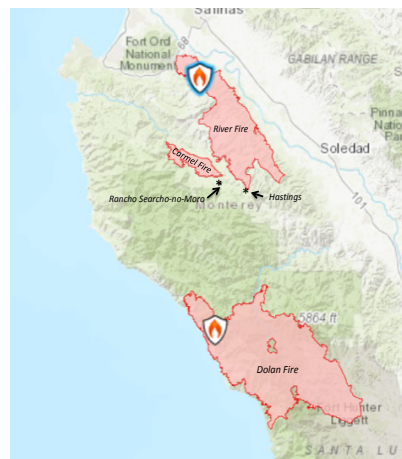


Valley side, broke over the ridge on Aug. 19th and came just short of doing in Hastings. It burned the (old) vineyard field after nearly taking out the Lower Barn. In the middle is our tree #168, a blue oak, which was partially burned by the fire but had an excellent acorn crop nonetheless.

As if the Carmel fire wasn't bad enough, the River fire, burning mostly over the hill on the Salinas



In contrast to #168, tree #146 in Madrone Canyon burned roots and all, a fate facilitated by having died in 2014. Here's Robert at one of the Acorn Woodpecker base stations behind this former stalwart of the Hastings acorn survey.



In case you're one of our subscribers "from away", here's a map of the fires, with arrows marking Hastings and Rancho Searcho-no-Moro.

Monterey Peninsula is in the upper left corner. The River fire was started by dry thunderstorms early on Aug. 16th; the Carmel fire was apparently started by sparks from a dragging chain; and

the Dolan fire is somehow linked to arson and an illegal pot growing operation in Big Sur. There is no shortage of ways to get the place burning this time of year.

Enough of that, at least for now. The good news isn't only that we here at the California Acorn Survey avoided a major disaster. (Allow us to offer our condolences to those who were not so lucky.) I'm also proud to announce that *The California Acorn*

Report recently broke into the top 10 most popular acorn reports on Amazon, just behind the *Cornhuskers Amalgamated Acorn Review* out of Lincoln, Nebraska and the *Kim Jong Il is Great Acorn Proceedings* from Pyongyang, North Korea. Congratulations to the entire staff (that would be me), and take the rest of the day off.

A RETROSPECTIVE OF BEFORE TIMES

As you may or may not remember, the year did not start out to be overtly horrifying. We had the F1s fly out for the holidays (remember flying? no, me neither)—Dale from Tokyo, where he's working for a startup, and Phoebe, along with her beau, Benjamin, from Ithaca, where she's now in grad school at Cornell (in Entomology—the same department Jannie Lou got her degree from a mere 33 years ago).



One of the highlights of Christmas was finally succeeding—after years of trying—in having dinner at Tommy's Wok in Carmel, the restaurant (remember restaurants? me neither) with the best Chinese food

on the Peninsula. From left to right: Dale, Phoebe, Benjamin, moi, & Jannie Lou of the Ravishing White Hair.

Another highlight was having drinks at Mulligan's Public House on Dolores in Carmel, where Adren—our Sacred Nanny



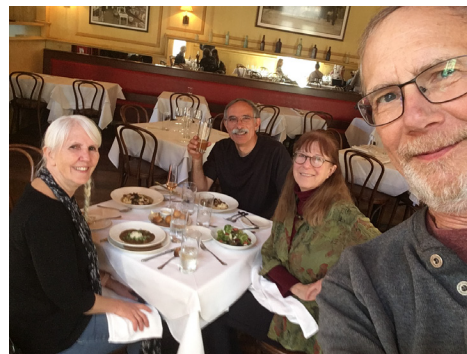
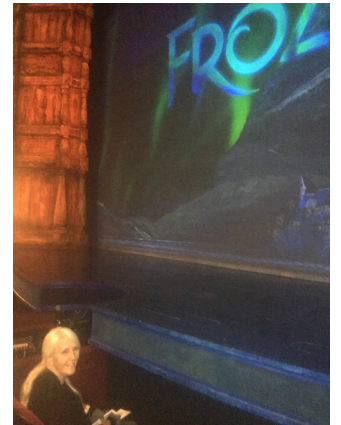
from 1993-1995—is one of the highly-skilled barmaids. I always wondered where Phoebe learned to mix those fabulous white Russians. From the right: Dale, Jannie Lou of the RWH, Benjamin, Phoebe, and, last but not least, the tapster herself.

We managed to fit in several other notable activities after the holidays and before the world went to shit. Bob Montgomerie visited after the American Society of Naturalists meeting at Asilomar in January. Later in the month we stopped in New York City on the way to Florida to see Janis's mum and my bro Bill. Finally, at the beginning of March, we snuck in a trip to New Orleans, where Cachagua friends Roy Mustelier and Kris Swanson celebrated Roy's 60th birthday.

Here's Bob Montgomerie (with Jannie Lou of the RWH & moi) actually INSIDE Rancho Searcho-no-Moro during his visit on Jan. 6th. Unless I'm forgetting a dinner with Ben and Cate, Bob was the last real person to set foot through the front door of our house until Sept. 15th, when podmates Robert and Tania stayed with us at the conclusion of the acorn survey.



And here's Jannie Lou at Frozen on Broadway on Jan. 31st, where we had front-row seats—quite a different experience from our usual spot several miles back behind a post. Frozen, like the world as we know it, was one of the casualties of the pandemic, closing for good on March 11th.



Last but not least was our trip to New Orleans to help Roy (with his significant other Kris, Jannie Lou of the RWH, et moi) celebrate his 60th birthday. Here

we are having lunch (remember going out for lunch? no, me neither) at La Petite Grocery on Magazine Street. C'était fantastique! Hope we get to go (anywhere at all, really, but to New Orleans in particular) again someday.

THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE?

No, apparently not yet, but my goodness, it sure did upend plans for the rest of the year (and no doubt beyond). A visit to Japan to see Dale? Nixed. Janis's and my combined 135th birthday bash? Forget about it. Ithaca to see Phoebe and our Cornell friends? Not a chance. Janis's musical tour of Ireland? Níl. A Grand Canyon raft trip with old friend Paul Sherman? No way. Australia? Only in our dreams.

Like most of you, we replaced such lofty travel ambitions with more modest activities, such as piecing together jigsaw puzzles, experimenting with various mask designs, and spending days planning a visit to Trader Joe's during old-fart hours to replenish supplies. Such visits, which we embark on at 3- to 4-week intervals, are exhausting; I have yet to dispel the fear that as soon as we get close to civilization we'll have to fight off hoards of zombies (are you SURE it's not the Zombie Apocalypse?) gnawing on the bones of survivors in order to make it to Pacific Grove. Actually, the apparent normality of the world once we get as far as Carmel Valley Village is positively terrifying. Haven't they heard?



We may not have been able to visit Ithaca this summer, but we did put together a Cornell jigsaw puzzle in its honor. Go Big Red!

Another fun activity during the pandemic has been playing with our dog Beezle, who, as it happens, likes dressing up in costumes. (Who knew?) Here she is as the Unicorn in Captivity.



Yet another pastime has been watching the birds at the feeder outside our kitchen windows. We sure got some strange hummingbirds, though. These oddly clown-faced ones were here pretty much all the time until the acorn crop started maturing in late August. Someone really needs to study these guys someday, whatever they are.



LET THE COUNT BEGIN

Despite the world going down the tubes, acorn-counting season nonetheless arrived on schedule. But before discussing the trials and tribulations of this year's survey, it has been brought to my attention that not all subscribers are cognizant of the purpose of the *California Acorn Survey*.

In short, the goal of the *California Acorn Survey* is, and always has been, complete and utter world domination. (Oops; did I say that out loud?) Of course, to accomplish this feat without raising undue suspicion, the Overlords of the *California Acorn Survey* came up with a unique plan: disguise the organization as an innocuous group of clueless flakes who fritter away their time on some totally ridiculous pseudo-scientific activity. [Say, what about counting acorns? Or is that *too* crazy? After all, it should be something at least half-believable.]

The seeds of this were sown in 1980 when Ron Mumme and I initiated the Hastings acorn survey, estimating acorn production on 250 individuals of the five main tree oaks throughout the reserve. The initial goal was to obtain data on acorn production relevant to acorn woodpeckers, as it was already clear by then that virtually everything the birds did was dependent on the acorn crop, which, oddly enough, nobody seemed to know much about. Somebody clearly DID need to study acorns someday, and apparently, it was destined to be us.

The methodology we used was modified from that suggested by one Walter ("Chuck") Graves, a Wildlife Biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game in Chico. Graves had the vision of monitoring acorn production throughout California with the classic goals of forecasting trends in

“squirrel...and pigeon concentrations” and incorporating the method into oak management plans for “selecting good mast-producing trees”.

Graves’ ideas never got very far in the strange and mysterious world of Cal Fish and Game, but after hearing his presentation at the First California Oak Symposium in June, 1979, we took his qualitative method (visually classifying individual trees into categories from 1 to 4 based on the acorn crop), added a timed survey (15 seconds by each of two observers; 30 seconds total), and set out on Oct. 4th, 1980 on the first annual Hastings acorn count.



I don't appear to have any slides of those early acorn counts, but here's one of our son Dale helping me out on the 1990 survey. I like to think that

learning to count acorns when he was 1 year old paved the way for him to become a maths guy.

Although initiated with the idea of using the data to provide insight on the machinations of the acorn woodpeckers and California scrub-jays we were primarily interested in at the time, the project eventually took on a life of its own. This further blossomed in 1994 when Jean Knops, after completing his thesis on how the Dutch invented nutrient cycling (or something like that; I forget the details), talked me into expanding statewide. Resistance was futile. Our march toward world domination was unleashed.



And, while I'm at it, here's one of moi, Bill Carmen, and Jean at Pat's Cabin—one of Hastings' archeological sites, during the 2005 survey.

AND, BEFORE YOU KNOW, IT'S 2020

So, here we are, a mere 40 years after the first Hastings survey and 26 years since the first statewide count. What burning questions we have, or are hoping, to answer will have to wait for another time. How, you are wondering, did it go this year?

The *California Acorn Survey* is a sufficiently major event in the lives of all of us (well, just me, actually) that I started planning for it well in advance. Jean, as the cofounder of the statewide survey, is always plan A. However, having moved to China a couple of years ago, Jean was hardly going to risk his life by flying to the US, from where he'd probably never be let back into China to rejoin his family. Plan B was Bill Carmen, a seasoned acorn counter and, more importantly, the official gin and tonic mixer of the *California Acorn Survey*. However, on Sept. 4th, he was inadvertently exposed to everyone's favorite virus while helping his daughter move in LA. With 4 days to go, it was time to conjure up plan C. A quick call to former post-doc Ian Pearse confirmed that he would be willing and able. Ian, however, lives in Fort Collins, and between having to fly out and juggle kids (of which he has three, the perfect juggling number), it occurred to me to ask Robert, my freshman college roommate, with whom we'd just spent 6 days during our evacuation from the fires. Foolishly, he said yes, and the game was once again afoot. (Bill's fine, by the way.)

So how, you ask, does one conduct a statewide acorn survey in the time of covid? Glad you asked. First off, I scratched all the usual places we stay—Hopland, Dye Creek, James Reserve, Sedgwick Reserve—as well as the generous hosts who have put us up in recent years—Kathy Purcell over by San Joaquin Experiment Station and Brad & Louise in LA. In their stead, I reserved strategically located camping sites. Next was food. Tragically, tacos, the mainstay of the *California Acorn Survey*, were out. Instead, I stocked up on easy-to-prepare camp food from Trader Joe's and Costco. And so, as Tuesday, Sept. 8th dawned, we were off.

Robert was both enthusiastic and arguably better prepared for camping than I. Here he is relaxing at Horseshoe Bend Campground near Coulterville on Sept. 11th.





I can't thank Robert enough for filling in and condensing the rigorous training regimen of an official California Survey Acorn counter—typically involving years of research, instruction, and drugs—in an unprecedented 15 minutes. Not to mention traveling around the state for 8 days stuck in my minivan, especially given that the air was unbreathable most of the time due to the fires. Here he is, sporting his exceedingly trendy mask, in front of one of our isolated valley oaks out in the ag fields around Davis on Sept. 11th.



After evacuating Rancho Searcho-no-Moro on Aug. 18th as the Carmel and River fires were closing in, we briefly gathered our wits at Dave Winkler's house in Pacific Grove (thanks Wink) and then retreated to the wisteria-draped Los Altos residence of Robert, my freshman college roommate, and his always-charming spouse Tania, who grew up in Carmel Valley and sponsored my first-ever visit there over Thanksgiving in the early 1970s. After a day or so we gave up on social distancing and merged into a pod, making Robert the obvious choice for plan C when Bill Carmen was forced to bow out. Here we are in their backyard in 2004: Robert & Tania, Jannie Lou (not yet of the Ravishing White Hair) et moi, with our respective daughters in between us: Elspeth on the left and Phoebe on the right.

Given the fires, smoke, and major shit-show of the world in general, the statewide survey went pretty well. Things were indeed apocalyptic the morning of Sept. 9th as the sun came up driving north on Hwy 101 in Sonoma County and the sky was getting darker, not lighter. Indeed, air quality was uniformly terrible until we got to southern California on Sept. 13th. (We went to southern California for the air,

apparently.) Our biggest problem was lack of access to the top of Liebre Mountain, Switzer's, and Pozo due to the statewide National Forest closures, although we were able to get to our Pozo site later in the month thanks to Bill Tietje (thanks Bill). Dinners were good—TJ's mushroom & herb risotto with some left-over chicken; TJ's macaroni and cheese with yet more left-over chicken; a Loma Linda Hawaiian Bowl from Costco with spicy chicken sausage; and Jaipur vegetables along with chicken sausages on brioche buns. You get the picture. Breakfasts were instant oatmeal and granola; lunches were cheese and crackers. The only outside food we ate the entire time were Costco hotdogs in Modesto on Sept. 11th when I was obliged to get my glasses fixed.



Not only did Robert stick it out for the entire statewide survey, he hung around for 2 days afterwards to do the even more

demanding Hastings count. Here we are Sept. 17th on School Hill with the burned hills of the River fire in the background.

Other than sites in National Forests, the only other problematic site was the Santa Rosa Plateau, closed since 2019 when parts of it burned in the Tenaja fire. Next



year I promise to get in touch beforehand and (hopefully) get permission to do the survey. This year we disavow all knowledge of going anywhere near the place. This photo of the reserve is from, ah, 2018, with Bill Carmen wearing his Robert Olson™ disguise. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

AND THE ACORNS?

Overall, it's a good, but not great, year for acorns. For valley oaks, for example, most sites were above average with the exceptions of Jasper Ridge and Kaweah Oaks, where they were fair to poor. Blue oaks did very well indeed, particularly on Liebre Mountain, where they had the best crop ever, and Hastings, where they had their best crop since 2007. (There are even several fall Acorn Woodpecker nests as a result.) Bucking the trend, however, Jasper Ridge and San Joaquin Experiment Station had below-average blue oak crops. Coast live oaks did pretty well, especially at Sedgwick, where they had their best crop since 2006. In contrast, canyon live oaks were below average at all sites, as were California black oaks except for our new site at Payne's Creek (replacing the burned Tower House site), where they were loaded. Also, we were never able to get up to our black oak site on top of Liebre Mountain, where they typically do unnervingly well.

As for the more obscure species, Engelmann oaks did very well at the Santa Rosa Plateau (which we definitely did NOT visit) with their second-best showing ever. Interior live oaks had a mostly average year, doing the best at Hopland and the worst at Sierra Foothills. Oregon oaks did well at our Trinity County site, where they've only had two "bad" crop years since we started counting there in 2002. And, as usual, tanbark oaks—*Notholithocarpus*—did well at all three sites—Chews Ridge, Empire Grade in Santa Cruz, and San Marcos Pass in Santa Barbara County.

Overall, Robert and I counted a total of 23,607 acorns, the most since 2007. The grand total for the *California Acorn Survey* is now 569,111. World domination is clearly within our grasp.

Although we avoided the building itself, we did camp at Sierra Foothill Research and Extension Center's bunkhouse on Sept. 10th, where I was gratified to find their Oswald the Lucky Rabbit hat still kicking around. I'd

never heard of Oswald except by this hat; apparently he's a thing, however. At least at SFREC.



One of our favorite trees on the Davis isolated valley oaks tour is this one inside the grounds of the AAA Auto Recycling LLC center at 42130 County Road 25 in Woodland. All the years I've gone there with Ian have been on the weekend when it was closed. This year, however, Robert and I were there on Friday, Sept. 11th, and got to meet Nas, pictured here, who recently purchased the business. Good luck, Nas, and please—don't let anything happen to that valley oak!



The bad news is that after counting acorns for 10 days straight, Robert went nutbar and took this adorable baby acorn hostage. [Sir...SIR!...please let the acorn go, back away slowly with your hands in the air, and nobody will get hurt.] We're hoping therapy will help; heaven knows we all need it these days.



THE PUBLISH OR PERISH DEPARTMENT

One, and not the only one, of the great things about retirement is that nobody is suggesting, much less pushing me, to publish anything. Why am I still doing it? Primarily to annoy my good friend and colleague H. (Brad) Shaffer at UCLA, who as of this writing has 686 citations in Google Scholar for 2020 as compared to my 780. Better stop slacking off, H!

I jest; H. works ridiculously hard saving the California herpetofauna, if not the world, while I fritter away my days putting together jigsaw puzzles, producing the *The California Acorn Report*, and writing papers that are impressive for both their obscurity and insignificance. I will spare you the details; if you insist, check them out at

<http://pages.nbb.cornell.edu/wkoenig/wicker/CalAcornSurvey.html>, OR simply Google “California Acorn Survey” and click the top hit.

TACOS AND MORE: A RETROSPECTIVE

As already mentioned, one of the tragedies of the pandemic has been the necessity of writing off our annual taco-tasting tour of California, traditionally done simultaneously with the statewide *California Acorn Survey*. Also gone, of course, are dinner parties and eating with people in general. In their stead, let’s relive some of our favorite food-inspired moments from the past, shall we?



Here to start, from August 2002, is a dinner party outside of the School House at Hastings, where I lived from 1982 (even before

Jannie Lou’s time) until 2010 (at least when I was in California). From the left: our son Dale, Brad, Louise, and their son Rob. Both kids now have Ph.D.s and are busy conquering the world from Tokyo (Dale) and Syracuse, NY (Rob).

One of our favorite places to eat has always been the Alpine Inn in Portola Valley, conveniently located close to Jasper Ridge. I’ve been told it’s now been renovated, which is probably a good thing given that its 1852 décor was a tad out of touch with the local ambiance, thick as the area now is with Teslas and tech stock options. Here are Bill and Jean after our lunch there on Sept. 8th, 2003.



No foray into old food adventures would be complete without mentioning the Cachagua Store, where Michael Jones had Monday night dinners starting around 2002 until it closed in 2016. Here, from August 2005, are friends Kathy Smith, Ben and Cate Barrera, and Jannie Lou (still not yet of the Ravishing White Hair) at one of the many Monday nights we ate there over the years.



I no longer remember exactly when tacos became de rigueur for the California Acorn Survey, but here’s one of my earliest taco adventures

from Sept. 3rd, 2005—the day Janis and the kids flew to Ithaca for her new job at Cornell. After dropping them off, I met Brad and Louise for a day on Mt. Hamilton looking for Lewis’s Woodpeckers, ending with dinner at this taqueria in Patterson.

Soon, however, we’d found that some of the finest tacos were to be had right at home, at Mi Tierra in Seaside. (I still haven’t found a better fish taco.) Here, until I can finally go there for lunch again, is Ithaca friend and Cornell colleague Cliff Kraft with Jannie Lou enjoying tacos during his visit to California in 2006.





Bill and Jean at Bravo! Taqueria in Redwood City on our way to Jasper Ridge in 2009.

By 2009 we had seriously begun our quest to find the best tacos in California, if not the world. Here testing an early candidate are

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

It's October, and the election is fast approaching. I'm pretty sure the staff of the *California Acorn Report* can't take another four years of this, so please vote and do your part to



And that's it for the 2020 *California Acorn Report*. Our editorial office remains:

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Carmel Valley, CA 93924 (wdk4@cornell.edu)**



Not all our dinners have been tacos, or even in the Northern Hemisphere. Following the 2010 acorn survey we went to Perth, Australia, for the behavioral ecology meeting, one of the highlights of which was dinner with old friends Rob Magrath, Claire Spottiswoode, and Nick and Jan Davies.

One of my many fond memories from working at Occidental College back in 1981-82 was lunch at The Bucket in Eagle Rock, where the garlic-slathered burgers were unparalleled.

We had lunch there in 2012, the year Jean was on sabbatical in China and Bill and Ian did the statewide survey with me.



No more dinners for the foreseeable future, I fear. The best we're able to do these days is throw popcorn at friends on Zoom, as we are doing here with Steve and Natalia Emlen on Sept. 19th.



The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is an international organization dedicated to the understanding of acorn production by oaks in California, and, incidently, world domination. Members and years of servitude include

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-83)
 Elizabeth Ross-Hooge, Glacier Bay National Park, AK (1991)
 Mark Stanback, Davidson, NC (1989-90, 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)
 Ian Pearce, Fort Collins, CO (2012-2013, 2015-19)
 Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 90-92, 94-98, 2000-19)
 Jean Knops, Suzhou, China (1993-2011, 2013-2017, 2019)
 Robert Olson, Los Altos, CA (2020)
 Walt Koenig, Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2020)

We also wish to thank our dedicated staff:

Janis Lou Dickinson (*Senior Copy Editor*)
 Tania Granoff (*Principal Choreographer*)
 Tamara Kaup (*Chief Operations Officer, Suzhou Division*)
 Karen Nardi (*General Counsel*)
 Dale Koenig (*Robot Army Captain*)
 Phoebe Koenig (*Beekeeping Specialist*)
 Jen Hunter (*Grand Poobah, Hastings Reserve*)

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