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# THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

*Searcho-no-moro No Moro Edition*

Volume 19

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

9 October 2015

Editor: Walt Koenig

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## A SEASON TO REMEMBER

Or, I'm thinking, perhaps better not. But the dedicated staff of the *California Acorn Survey* has survived setbacks before—the unsuccessful attempt to stop the survey by terrorists back in 2001 by halting all acorn counting in North America for 3 days comes to mind—and is committed to continuing to do so in the future. So, let's start with some acorn poetry, which is always a good way to change the subject and start off a newsletter, especially this one.

*Acorns picked up on the road  
improve when eaten à la mode.  
Acorns, sautéed, grilled or dried  
are always perfect as a side.*

*Acorns truly add great cheer  
especially brewed into beer.  
They are also super fine  
fermented into acorn wine.*

*Acorn drawings on the wall  
remind us it's already fall.  
Acorn photos from the past  
cheer us up with thoughts of mast.*

*Acorns filling up our tummy  
always manage to taste yummy.  
Acorn thoughts inside our brain  
invariably will keep us sane.*

*So, just like continental drift  
remember—acorns are a gift.  
They're nature's method to surmount  
adversity—and learn to count.*

## ONWARD AND COUNTWARD

As usual, preparations for the *California Acorn Survey* involved a host of exciting activities, starting with the First Annual Hastings Cruise and field trip to Santa Cruz Island, led by none other than Chief Slave of the project, postdoctoral fellow Mario Pesendorfer. Mario, by the way, has been doing a

great job running the project ever since former Chief Slave Ian Pearse left in 2013 to lead the Illinois Natural Acorn Survey. Mario came to us from Nebraska, but did his thesis on island scrub-jays. It took him a while, but he eventually convinced us to accompany him out to Santa Cruz Island so that he could show off the place.



*The Santa Cruz Island crew as we came off the boat on 16 July. In the front, Ally, Megan, and Stunkel; Riley and Torrey in the middle; Eric, the amazing Julie Jo, Mickey, Natasha, Dana, Rada, Blake, Janis, and Yours Truly standing in back. Blake is a Search Ranch neighbor who works at Rana Creek Design; his S.O. Emily was also along but apparently swam instead of taking the boat.*

Spending a couple of days out on the island was great, and Mario was a fabulous tour guide, taking us on a beautiful and wild ride out to the west side of the island, cooking food for the entire crew, and leading swimming classes at Prisoner's Harbor at the end while waiting for the boat to take us back to the mainland. Thanks, Mario!



*Mario taking a break from his attempts to keep us well fed and out of trouble at the Santa Cruz Island Reserve Station in mid-July. Next to Hastings, this is clearly one of the most fabulous of the many great NRS sites. It even has acorn woodpeckers, albeit living inaccessibly 80+ feet up in the eucalyptus trees around the station.*



*While I'm still on the subject of the field season, I want to give a big waka to Hastings's Grand Poobah Vince, who continues to be fabulously kind and helpful as he accommodates all our pathetically self-absorbed research (and often personal) needs while keeping the place from falling apart and—just*

*as importantly—solvent. MVZ, Hastings, and especially we are really lucky to have him. Vince, we love you! Go ahead and take that Dr. Pepper—you deserve it!*

## BRIDES IN WHITE; GIRLS IN PINK

Unfortunately, we only had a few days after returning from Santa Cruz Island before we headed back East. However, we stopped along the way in Santa Fe, where Janis's former grad student and Hastings alumna Caitlin was celebrating the forthcoming acorn-counting season by marrying her long-time partner and co-Big Red graduate Jessie. Congratulations, girls!



*And here they are—no, not both brides, but Janis and Caitlin. The wedding was, as all weddings should be, beautiful and touching, and we got to meet a lot of great people while staying at the house Caitlin's parents rented for the occasion in Santa Fe. I found it particularly awesome that Caitlin and Jessie's dresses were obviously chosen to match Janis's ravishing white hair.*

While I'm on the subject of matching dresses, I have to digress to show off the pink sundress modeled by Janis and Phoebe last summer. Well, not exactly both last summer; the photo of Janis (pre-white hair) comes from 1989 when the kids were but twinkles in her eyes. Admit it—they're both totally adorable.



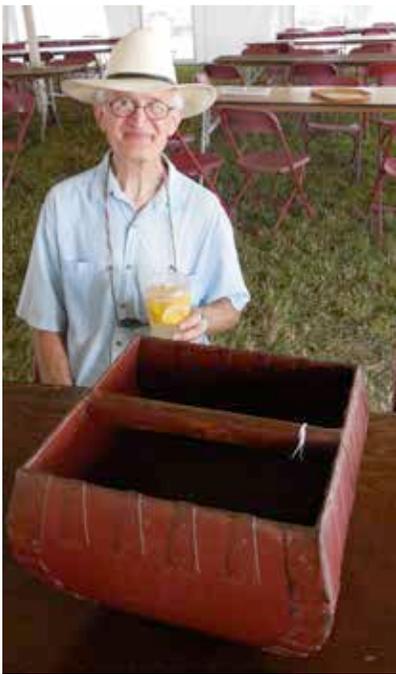
Returning to Ithaca, there were multiple celebrations of the forthcoming acorn-counting season. First there was our 2<sup>nd</sup> annual dinner with Steve and Natalia at Suzanne's overlooking Seneca Lake. Then there was dinner with Phoebe—currently working on her senior thesis and in her last semester at Cornell—at Hazelnut Kitchen in Trumansburg. In the middle I made it to my second roller derby bout, accompanied by our colleague and friend Jim, who was such a good sport he even got a burger with me at Five Guys beforehand. Go SufferJets!



*Janis (with her ravishing white hair again), Yours Truly dressed up for once, Natalia, and Steve at Suzanne's Fine Regional Cuisine on 13 August celebrating some birthdays and, of course, the looming acorn-counting season. Steve, an old Cornell colleague and fellow cooperative breeding enthusiast, and Natalia are good friends whose retirement a couple of years ago we've been watching carefully in hopes of figuring out how it's done. Dinner, by the way, was great, even if fish tacos were, unaccountably, not on the menu.*

Another notable excursion we made during the pre-count season was to the nearby Madison Bouckville Antique Show with our friends Barbara and Chuck, another pair of Cornell colleagues who are doing their best to ease into retirement mode. The show itself is a lot of fun, and despite our resolutions to the contrary, we all ended up buying stuff. Chuck got a nice antique stepladder and an interesting old basket, Barbara a lovely antique folding chair, and we came away with a antique wooden toy airplane that we were planning to hang inside one of the living room lofts in Rancho Searcho-no-Moro. At least the airplane is still with us, currently sitting on the runway in our living room in Ithaca awaiting a new flight plan.

*Chuck toasting his find at the Bouckville Antique Show on*



*16 August. As is obvious from his hat, Chuck, emeritus in Development Sociology, always dreamed of being a cowhand on a dude ranch in Montana. None of us were sure how the basket plays into that, but if nothing else it will make a great receptacle for the New York Times that, quaintly enough, still gets delivered to his house on Ellis Hollow Road every morning.*

*While I'm at it, here's Barbara with Janis at the Brewster Inn on Cazenovia Lake, where we had dinner on the way back from the antique show. Not really the cowgirl type, Barbara, a newly retired wetlands ecologist in Natural Resources, clearly envisions herself as a master sommelier, perhaps at a place such as Le Meurice on the rue de Rivoli in Paris. By a remarkable coincidence, she and Chuck are currently in France, so we'll see whose retirement dream comes true first.*



One final pre-count excursion I need to mention is the trip we took to the Rongovian Embassy in Trumansburg, which, as reported last year, was closed for some time. It has now reopened thanks to the failure of the Senate to block the treaty with Rongovia negotiated by the Obama Administration. For all us Ithacans, it will be a great relief to know that we can once again look forward to seeing some of those adorable Rongovians panhandling as we walk to Cinemapolis for a movie after dinner on the at-long-last remodeled Ithaca Commons.



*I don't seem to have a good photo of the Rongovian Embassy but I do have Janis (still with her ravishing white hair) at Sunset Park overlooking*

*lovely Cayuga Lake near our house in Ithaca wishing Rongovians everywhere to live long, prosper, and—given that Rongovia has one of the highest diversity of oaks in eastern Europe—count lots and lots of acorns.*

## ACORNS → BABY WOODPECKERS

On 31 August, after over a month of celebrations, the time to count acorns finally arrived. Jean and I left at predawn and flew into SFO, rented a car, and headed down to Carmel Valley, stopping to warm up our counting skills on the tanoaks north of Santa Cruz and to see whether I have the right temperament to be a thistle.

*Yours truly as an artichoke at one of the vegetable stands in Moss Landing. What do you think; is it me? Personally, I've always thought of myself as more of the asparagus type, but it's possible I've been underselling myself all these years.*



The next day included a field trip to Chews Ridge for the tanoaks up there, but more excitingly, started out by chasing around Hastings with Ally (our spring FA who was about to leave) and Samantha (one of our new winter FAs) to band nestling acorn

woodpeckers at three nests. Of course, we had yet to do the acorn survey, but the existence of several fall nests suggested *a priori* that it was not a bad acorn year, since such nests are, at least as far as we know, only found in years when the acorn crop is good. (The last fall nest we know of was in 2011—the last pretty good acorn year at Hastings—when I banded a nestling at Lambert on 1 November.) In any case, having nestlings to band is always a thrill for the winter FAs, since otherwise they never get a chance to hold baby woodpeckers—unquestionably one of the most amazing things that nature can turn acorns into. And this was not even the end of the fall nests; one additional nest at Plaque Annex needed banding when we got back from the survey. In all, I got to band 6 babies in 4 nests; several others were started but failed. We're now wondering whether a small number of fall nests are attempted almost every year, but usually missed unless cavities are checked regularly. Gosh; I bet those birds would be interesting to study....



*Babymania! Ally and Yours Truly on 1 Sept. (above) and Dale on 14 Sept. (right) getting the thrill of holding baby acorn woodpeckers. Dale, who spends most of his time at UC Davis dealing with mathematical proofs and reading Japanese novels, was surprisingly excited about the whole process. Wait until we get him down there in the spring and can show him how fun it is to juggle whole broods!*



## THE RETURN OF THE MILDEW HAT

Finally, on 2 September, the statewide survey blasted off. As in the last several years, we headed south and followed the counterclockwise *Avenida invertida de las bellotas* rather than retracing the famous *Carretera de los robles* going north carved out by the Padres in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in their bizarre quest to get the native Californians to harvest acorns and craft them into cute ornaments for export back to Spain during the infamous *bellotomania* period. (The scheme actually worked fine until the speculative acorn ornament bubble burst in 1821, precipitating the end of the Spanish Colonial era.)

In any case, the big news on Day 1 of the survey was that, despite a court injunction and petitions signed by thousands, the Mildew Hat made a comeback! For readers who have blissfully forgotten, the beloved Mildew Hat was my blue terrycloth hat that I could dunk in whatever disgusting water trough or pond happened to be available to keep my head cool during those hot days acorn counting. Admittedly, my old Mildew Hat had become rather, one might generously say, worn and tired. While packing for the survey, however, I ran across a brand-new blue terrycloth hat and thus, for the first time since somewhere back in the early oughts, was once again able to gross out both Jean and pretty much everyone else we ran across during the survey.

*Yours truly and ...wait...that's not the Mildew Hat! It's the Official Mouseketeers Acorn Hat, not seen since the Mickey Mouse Club changed Fridays from Acorn-counting Day to Talent Round-up Day after the great mast bust of 1957. Who can forget: Meeska-Mooska-Mouseketeer! Acorn counting time is here!*



Day 2 brought us to Liebre Mountain, where we once again were chaperoned by the USFS, specifically a nice guy with the implausible name of Vilius Zukauskas, who was kind enough to meet us and let us in the gate on the west side of the mountain, thereby saving us some 20 miles of painful driving on a dirt road to get to our black oak site from the east end of the road.



*Vilius opening the gate on the west end of road 7N23 on the way up Liebre Mountain in Angeles National Forest on Day 2. Thanks to Vilius and the equally-improbably-named Evy Ribenieks, our contact at the main USFS office in Acton, for helping us out. Meanwhile, Jean engages in some insider trading of his acorn stocks after their poor showing at Pozo and Sedgwick on Day 1.*

After Liebre Mountain, we counted at Switzer's in the San Gabriel Mountains and then made the rather painful drive through rush-hour traffic to Chez Brad & Louise in West LA. As always, however, the commute was worth it, both because Brad & Louise are fabulous hosts, and because it provided Jean with time to catch up with posting our progress on his Facebook page. Yes, you heard that correctly! You can now keep tabs on *The California Acorn Survey* as it progresses (or not) around the state, as well as whatever else happens to come into Jean's head, by directing your browser to <https://www.facebook.com/johannes.knops.7?fref=ts>. In fact, next year we're thinking of fitting ourselves with GoPros or, better yet, having a drone uploading video highlights of the survey directly to either Jean's Facebook page or the CAS website (<http://www.nbb.cornell.edu/wkoenig/wicker/CalAcornSurvey.html>). Next thing you know, we might even switch and make the *California Acorn Report* electronic. Just kidding! We know you, Dear Reader, would never put up with anything as crass and moderne as *that*.



*Somehow I again managed to not get any photos of Louise, so instead, here's Brad showing off his world-famous breakfast mush the morning of 3 Sept. Brad is doing well in his position as head of the La Kretz Center for Acorn Studies at UCLA, and has already managed to get into a property line tiff with one of his neighbors—usually the kind of thing that takes him at least a decade to get embroiled in.*

Day 3 saw us count the ever-serene Santa Rosa Plateau, Palomar Mountain, and end up, as usual, at the James Reserve, where we had a chance to catch up with Kevin Loope, another former Cornellian now on a postdoc at UC Riverside studying yellowjackets in California.



*Yours Truly and Kevin, who's tall but isn't really the 8-foot giant he appears to be in this photo, at the James Reserve on 4 Sept. Kevin was having a hard time finding yellowjackets, which he was supposed to be studying, so: Kevin—in case you're still there, I again recommend that you book a trip to Santa Cruz Island and stay at the NRS station, where they were all over the place.*

We finished up SoCal on Day 4 and started the long trek up the Sierra foothills, counting at Kaweah Oaks and the somewhat offbeat Three Rivers sites along the Kaweah River before driving to the San Joaquin Experiment Station north of Fresno, where we were fortunate to be hosted by Kathy Purcell and her long-time imaginary partner Ken, who, much to my surprise, exists after all, and turns out not to be a giant invisible rabbit, as I had feared. Kathy is a colleague and fellow avian oak woodland researcher who's been a good friend of the *California Acorn Survey* for many years, and it's great to discover she's no more delusional than the rest of us.



*Kathy at the acorn woodpecker sap tree (an interior live oak) outside her and Ken's fabulous straw bale house the morning of 6 Sept. This may be the first time I've ever seen liquid bubbling out of ACWO sap holes quite so enthusiastically.*

## AND ON TO THE NORTH COUNTRY FAIR

Things began to get dicey on Sunday, 6 Sept. when, having totally neglected to call Sierra Foothills Station, we had to hope that we would be able to sneak into the bunkhouse and past the gate on the way to our site in the Schubert Natural Area. Luckily, we succeeded on both counts, the latter thanks to Gary, one of the ranch hands who was kind enough to lend us the key to the gate despite the fact that he had every reason to find our story of acorn counting totally, well, nuts. Thanks, Gary! You were, of course, right; we *are* crazy. Sorry to mislead you.

Day 6, Labor Day, we counted at Sierra Foothills and then took the proverbial day off and climbed Brokeoff Mountain, a 2600' climb pretty much straight up, in Lassen Volcanic National Park. Brokeoff is, along with Lassen Peak itself, one of the two main remaining parts of Mount Tehama, which used to encompass the entire area back in the day. Even now, however, it's still pretty impressive; too bad you can't see any acorns from up there.



*Yours Truly sporting the brand-new Mildew Hat at the top of Brokeoff Mountain, with Lassen in the background. I have to admit that climbing a peak like this begins to make me feel like I could actually get old someday.*

On day 7 it was back to the grind as we counted acorns at Dye Creek, Tower House, and our Oregon oak site in Trinity County and then made the rather unfortunate decision to keep going and drive west to Hwy 101 via Hwy 36 and then south to Hopland rather than returning to I5 and heading across via Clearlake. [Note to self: *it's not that scenic*. Turn around and go back to Redding!]

Are we bored yet? OK; we'll skip day 9, when Jean, Bill Carmen, and Yours Truly met Ian—who is planning to return to California early next year—in Davis in order to survey isolated valley oaks in Yolo County that Ian identified in 2013. The idea here is that if pollen is (a) limiting and (b) doesn't always move very far, then trees that are off by themselves

should have lower fertilization success and produce fewer acorns than trees that are growing near other conspecifics. The challenge, of course, is to find trees that meet the specifications of being isolated, yet accessible, in a landscape that is thoroughly, and I mean thoroughly, controlled by Big Ag.



*Ian on the way to one of the isolated valley oaks in the middle of an endless ag field somewhere in the vicinity of Davis. Yes, that dark spot off on the horizon is the tree we're headed for.*

Last year we made the mistake of sending Bill off to find all these trees on his own after having neglected to provide him with a detailed description of how to get from one site to the next. Sorry, Bill! We were much more successful this year, although there weren't many acorns, so it's not like we were able to get data that showed much. So far, however, it looks as though there is, perhaps, a slight negative effect of isolation on acorn production, driven almost entirely by the 2013 data. So stay tuned; as always, we'll be back next year!

## THE RESTAURANT REVIEW

I seem to be running out of space already, so before it's too late I'm going to review the one interesting new place we ate this year.

**YANG'S NOODLES**, 5860 Stockton Blvd, Sacramento. Jean, as many of you are aware, has long had a "thing" for China, and, having returned from a trip there just before the survey, he was keen to get Chinese food when the opportunity arose, which it did the night of Day 5 as we headed to an uncertain fate at Sierra Foothills after fighting the Labor Day masses in Yosemite Valley. After a bit of searching, Jean chose Yang's Noodles in Sac's Little Saigon. (Isn't Saigon in some totally different country? Oh well; whatever.) Jean, ever the adventurer, got the "tofu with thousand year old egg" and the "sour veggies & pork hot pot" while I got the shrimp pan fried noodles. Jean was pretty happy with his dishes—both were bizarre enough

that he apparently felt like he was back in China. My pan fried noodles, with lots of garlic and baby bok choy artfully arranged on top, were not great, but Jean pointed out no real Chinese dish ever has noodles and vegetables together except in soup, so I may not have allowed Yang to show himself in his best light. *Rating: 2.5 acorns.*

*Jean contemplating his 1000 year old egg at Yang's Noodles, perhaps trying to make sure they hadn't cheated him by passing off an egg that was only 950 years old. He seems unsure about it, but it definitely seemed old enough to me. Jean is not only doing a lot of his research in China these days but is even contemplating the possibility of moving there. Chinese acorn survey? Sure; why not?*



## DROUGHT AND THE ACORN CROP

After meeting up with Ian, we spent the night back at Bill's house in Mill Valley and then counted acorns at Jasper Ridge before returning to Carmel Valley and spending the rest of Saturday and all of Sunday doing the Hastings acorn survey (year 36!). So, you might be asking yourself, what kind of a year is it? Has the much-touted California drought led to an acorn bust, or what? And if so, what's the deal with those fall woodpecker nests? Those are good questions, and for once we have some answers. (Maybe not *good* answers, but answers, at least.)

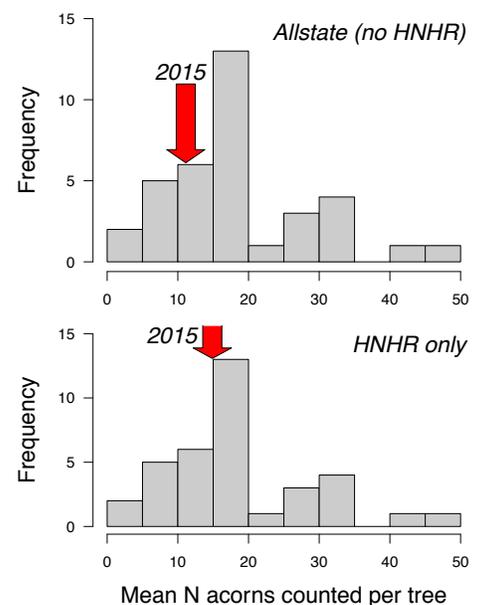
First off, there is the issue as to whether it's really a particularly bad drought or not. Without degenerating into one of my famous and intensely boring diatribes about the frequency distribution of annual rainfall in California, the answer is no. Precipitation at Hastings (1939 – 2015) has a long-term mean of 20.5", a median of 18.4", and has ranged from 10.3" (1988-89) to 43.8" (1982-83). Rainfall for the past four years (since 2011-12) has been 12.3", 13.4", 12.2", and 17.6"—hardly a record; in fact, one need only go back to 1986-87 – 1989-90 to break it (total rainfall = 48.4", compared to 55.5" for 2011-12 – 2014-15). The reason why the state is in such dire straights has much less to do

with the amount of precipitation than the fact that temperatures, at least up in the Sierras, have been warmer than usual, and as a result water has come as rain (and runoff) rather than snowpack—the latter of which being what the state's vast reservoir system has been designed to capture as it melts in the spring and summer. I'll stop now, I promise.

Back to the trees. Overall, it's a fair acorn year; certainly not as bad as it gets, but on the low side. Overall, we counted a mean of 10.9 acorns (in 30 s) per tree, making it the 8<sup>th</sup> worst year out of 22 for the statewide survey. Sites where it was definitely bad included San Joaquin (no acorns at all), Kaweah River (worst year yet), and Tower House (2<sup>nd</sup> worst year). On the other hand, it was pretty darn good at Dye Creek (5<sup>th</sup> best year ever), reasonably good at Palomar Mountain and Switzer's, and, as is almost always the case, good to very good for the tanoaks.

At Hastings, however, it's a squarely middling acorn year. We counted a mean of 14.9 acorns per tree, giving it an overall rank (from the top) of 21<sup>st</sup> out of 36. For those of you who have placed bets on the individual species, it ranked 11<sup>th</sup> for canyon live oak, 16<sup>th</sup> for valley oak, 17<sup>th</sup> for blue oak, and 29<sup>th</sup> for coast live oak (the third bad year in a row for them). We counted no acorns on the black oaks, which has happened twice before (in 1991 and 1992), and isn't all that surprising given that many of our original trees have died and our sample size is getting pretty pathetic. There's definitely something interesting going on *there*, I dare say.

*The frequency distributions of the mean number of acorns counted per tree for the state (excluding Hastings) and for Hastings only, with 2015 marked by the arrows. 2015 was on the low side, but just barely, especially at Hastings, where the crops of valley, blue, and canyon live oaks were all above their respective long-term means. Apparently, those wily woodpeckers can have fall nests even when the acorn crop is merely just "OK".*



## THE SEASON FIRES UP

The acorn count itself ended on a high note as we left Mill Valley on the 11<sup>th</sup>, counted at Jasper Ridge, had lunch at the Alpine Inn, and then went on to Hastings where we counted that afternoon and the following day. Janis (flying out for a YardMap.org meeting) and Dale (who picked her up at SFO) then joined us for the annual End of Count Banquet on 12 Sept. Jean left on the 13<sup>th</sup> to make it back for Tilly's 7<sup>th</sup> birthday while Bill drove back up to Mill Valley, Dale and I banded the ACWO baby at Plaque Annex, and, last but not least, Janis and I flew back to Ithaca on the 16 September redeye.



*Jean, Bill, Dale, Janis (with her ravishing white hair), and Yours Truly at the End of Count Banquet on 12 September. I realize it's not a great shot, but it's now a historic one, being the last photo we took of an intact Searcho-no-Moro.*

And with that, I fear I'm obliged to end with the sad news, of which many of you are already aware, that our beloved Rancho Searcho-no-Moro burned to the ground in the Tassajara Fire the evening of 19 September. I will spare you all the ways that this event is a blow to both of us, as well as the ways in which it could have been considerably worse. I will merely say that we are now working on rebuilding, and are optimistic that, despite significantly complicating our lives over the next year or so, there



*We got back to Ithaca the morning of 17 Sept. and on the 19<sup>th</sup> took a bus trip to NYC where, among other things, we went to the San*

*Gennaro festival in Little Italy. It was a fun way to close out the season, although things degenerated on the ride home as Janis started getting frantic texts and emails from friends and neighbors in Carmel Valley.*

will be a new, equally glorious Rancho Searcho-no-Moro for us to move into, and for you to visit, in time for the 37<sup>th</sup> *California Acorn Survey* next fall. In the meantime, keep those acorns counted, and



remember: only *you* can prevent forest fires.

*One of Janis's more artistic shots of our hill after the fire.*

## WRAP-UP AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

And that is all for the 2015 *California Acorn Report*. We

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Our editorial offices are:

**Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road  
Ithaca, NY 14850 and Hastings Reservation, 38601 E.  
Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, CA 93924  
(wdk4@cornell.edu)**

and

**School of Biol. Sciences, Univ. of Nebraska, 348 Manter  
Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588 (jknops2@unl.edu)**

*The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is a not-so-secret international organization whose goal is to understand acorn production by California oaks.*

*And eat a lot of great tacos.*

*Names and years of service include*

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-83)  
Mark Stanback, Davidson, NC (1989-90, 1992)  
Elizabeth Ross-Hooge, Glacier Bay National Park, AK (1991)  
Jay McEntee, Tucson, AZ (2005)  
Xiaoan Zuo & Wenjin Li, Lanzhou, China (2010)  
Eric Walters, Norfolk, VA (2006-2010)  
Maria Dolores Carbonero Muñoz, Pozoblanco, Spain (2013)  
Ian Pearse, Champaign, IL (2012-2013, 2015)  
Mario Pesendorfer, Jamesburg, CA (2014-2015)  
Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 90-92, 94-98, 2000-15)  
Jean Knops, Lincoln, NE (1993-2011, 2013-2015)  
Walt Koenig, Ithaca, NY/Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2015)

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