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# THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

*Making acorn counting great again since 1980*

Volume 20

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

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Editor: Walt Koenig

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## BRAVE NEW WORLD

It's been quite a year. Let's cut to the chase, however, and start off with what everyone's been waiting for, namely acorn poetry. Nothing says "let's count some acorns!" like a Shakespearean sonnet:

*Quietly working to save the earth  
Hanging from the ground to the top  
Jays and woodpeckers full of mirth  
Eagerly awaiting the annual crop*

*Each a wonderous natural world  
Nurturing weevils, wasps and more  
Awaiting their chance to be unfurled  
And taken away to someone's store*

*Every year they manage to amaze  
All who are able to count their number  
Always trying to find new ways  
To survive and grow into more lumber*

*Go forth and proclaim the name to all  
Acorns! Surely the best part of fall!*

Alright, if you insist. One more:

*Celebrate the forest green  
Where oaken trees fill the air  
Skies awash with birds unseen  
The ground criss-crossed by mice and bear*

*Best is when the earth awakes  
As oaken seeds create their bounty  
Falling upon both sod and lakes  
Spreading new life throughout the county*

*Acorns in search of a place to lay  
That won't succumb to drought or mouse  
With luck picked by a hungry jay  
And buried in its own dark house*

*There to set root, deep and long  
And then to grow, tall and strong*

Of course, this year does arguably lend itself more appropriately to limericks:

*A professional counter named Walt  
Knew not when he should halt  
He first counted trees  
Then moved onto peas  
After joining a vegetable cult*

I admit, that one's pretty lame. How about:

*There once was an acorn named Trump  
Who became an embarrassing chump  
He dropped into a hole  
Was 'et by a vole  
And ended up in its next dump*

Enough of politics, however. This year's acorn counting season was exceptional for lots of reasons, starting with the move of the *California Acorn Survey's* worldwide headquarters from Ithaca, New York, where it's been since 2008, to the sun-drenched upper Carmel Valley, California, where it all began back in 1980—part of our national *making acorn counting great again* campaign.



*Although we wimped out on moving all our stuff ourselves, we did pack everything. This involved around a hundred trips to U-Haul to buy several thousand boxes along with the left over paper from three failed national newspapers for wrapping up all our stuff. In case you were worried, fear not—our dog Beezle is safely and carefully bubble-wrapped inside the big box in the top left.*

## ITHACA, MY ITHACA

It's been 8 years (11, if you start when Janis and the kids moved, but who's counting?) since *The California Acorn Survey* relocated to upstate New York. Why, you ask? No, it's not because of the taxes; in fact, the survey has been able to use its \$916 million loss back in 1995 (a *really* bad acorn year) to avoid paying taxes ever since. It might, of course, have been because of the outstanding natural beauty of the area. But no, it wasn't that either. It was actually because one of us—the talented one—got a job at Cornell (is that a school?) after 18 years of being stuck as a trailing spouse in California. It was definitely time to switch positions.

Eight (or 11) years, a lot of fun hockey games, untold numbers of trips to Wegman's, and many fabulous evenings with Barbara and Chuck, Jim and Anne, and Steve and Natalia, it was, for better or for worse, time for me, at least, to retire and drag what was left of our family (one sweet but dim dog having replaced our two fledged kids) back to Carmel Valley. Ithaca, however, undeniably provided some of the most eventful and exciting years of our lives, and we owe everyone back there (at least everyone likely to be reading this) both a thank you and a big hug. So let's take some time for a few reminiscences.

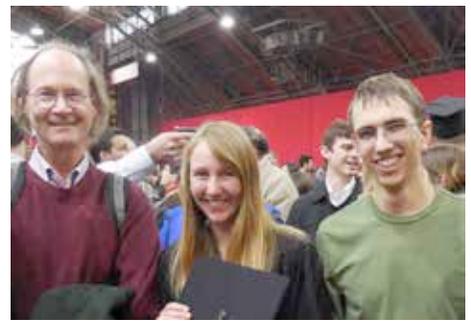


*Ithaca is a small town with a lot to offer, but a good place to start is the annual Ice Festival on the Commons. Here I am at the 2013 event waiting for a mojito at the festival's fabulous ice bar. Make that on the rocks, please.*

*The downside of a place with an annual ice festival is that winter doesn't know when to stop. Here's our Cayuga Heights back yard buried in snow in February 2010. It finally melted a few days before we left in 2016.*



*Dale, a junior in high school when we dragged him away, was unswayed by Ithaca's charms and returned to California after a one year sentence, but Phoebe loved the place and became an enthusiastic Ithacaphile. She also grew up. Here she is with Dale and her wonderful undergrad bee mentor Tom Seeley at her Cornell graduation last December. (Go Big Red!) She's currently in Minneapolis where she is well on her way to becoming a professional bee-ologist.*



*Dale did condescend to visit, at least. Here he is with Feebs at Buttermilk Falls on Christmas 2006 just before the park Nazi came and ticketed us for hiking on the trails, which were closed for no obvious reason other than to piss us off.*

*Another of Ithaca's cultural highlights is Roller Derby--everybody's favorite sport, at least during the acorn-counting-off season. Here's a selfie of yours truly, Feebs, and our friend Steve Emlen (a fellow Cornell retiree) at a bout in Cass Park in 2014. Go SufferJets!*



*Did I forget to mention Beezle, our behaviorally-challenged dog? She inveigled her way into our home in 2009 and we've been unsuccessful ridding ourselves of her ever since. Here she is trying out to be a reindeer for Christmas in 2015.*



*Oh—and we did actually do some work for Cornell as well. Here’s our 2009 BioNB6702 seminar class, complete with Steve Emlen in front, Chuck Geisler in back, and a gaggle of talented (and now all former) grad students: Kevin Loope, Jessie Barker, Chris Wilson, Caitlin Stern, Maggie Wray, Tom Kraft, Sara Kaiser, and Rebecca Lohnes. If I recall correctly, our topic that year was “acorn counting for fun and profit.”*



*Eventually, however, something about the East Coast seemed to have changed us. Could it have been just after those giant pea pods showed up in the garden? We’ll never know for sure. In any case, here’s the selfie we sent to The Masters informing them that the Ithacans were beginning to suspect something was amiss and that it was time to return to the Mother Ship back in California.*

## ROAD TRIP

And so June 17<sup>th</sup> found us on yet another cross-country road trip, this time in our recently acquired 2009 Volvo S60 rather than the 1989 Camry I came out in back in 2005, having scrapped the latter (literally) several years ago when it failed the New York safety inspection. As always we made our first stop Meadville, PA to see our friends Ron and Sarah. We followed this with a stopover in Iowa City at Janis’s sister’s house, after which we dropped in on Jean, co-director of the *California Acorn Survey*, at Cedar Point field station in the wilds of Ogallala, Nebraska. From there we made our way to Reno, had lunch with Dale (still in Davis, nearing the end of a Ph.D. in topology), and finally home in, well, not Rancho Searcho No Moro, which is still mostly a cinder in our eyes, but the Robles del Rio area of Carmel Valley Village, where we are living until our house is rebuilt.

*Here I am saluting Irving B. Weber—Iowa City’s beloved official acorn counter—only one of the many, many memorable highlights of the trip back to California.*



## HOME, TEMP HOME

A lot’s happened since we got back. Almost immediately on June 29<sup>th</sup> it was Bruce Lyon’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Santa Cruz.



*Bruce, ahead of the curve as usual, celebrating with his “making American coots great again” hat. Welcome to the Old Farts Club, Bruce.*

Next we spent some quality time with the Hastings crowd. As the end of the season blow-out we treated everyone to Grease at the Forest Theater in Carmel.

*Starting in the lower left, here’s Kaija, Robin, Mickey, Amanda, Hannah, Dale (visiting for the weekend) Natasha, and Emilee; Julie Joe, Eric (hat only) Riley, Torrey, Annie, and Jen in the upper right corner. Yes, blankets are de rigueur on summer evenings outdoors in Carmel, where all that’s missing to make it like Ithaca in the winter is ice, sleet, snow, and more snow.*



Then there was my retirement trip to Paris, where we hadn't been since our honeymoon in 1987. We even got both kids to tag along, which was great fun.

*Here's Jani Lou (still with her ravishing white hair) and Phoebe on our sight-seeing trip on the Seine with the Pont Neuf in the background. Vive la France!*



Paris, it turns out, has great food. (Who knew?) Phoebe was fabulous tracking down where to eat, including excursions to find the best falafal in Paris and lunch at L'Ami Jean (27, rue Malar), where we had a *très magnifique* meal including cold lobster soup, quail breast with *hericots verts*, razor clams (!) lobster risoto, incredible melt-in-your-mouth beef with cremini mushrooms and smoothed potatoes, and a dessert of rice pudding with whipped carmel pistacio crumble and strawberry sorbet and yogurt. Yes, it was every bit as *incroyable* as it sounds.



*Here we are (minus photographer Janis) recovering outside after our fabulous dejeuner at L'Ami Jean.*

But wait—there's more! After a week in Paris the kids returned to their lives but Janis and I went on to the biennial ISBE meeting in Exeter, UK, where what amounts to my entire lab group got together for a couple of notable pub crawls.

*Here, for perhaps the first and only time all in one place, are Mickey, Josh (recovering from palm-tree jumping last spring), Eric, Natasha, moi, Vicky, and Mario.*



In the spirit of what appears to be a retirement goal of maximizing my carbon footprint, my next trip—one week after returning from the UK—was to Washington, DC, for the National Acorns and Oaks Congress (NAOC). (What were all those bird people were doing there, anyway?)

*The NAOC was held at the Washington Hilton Hotel, famous as the site of the Reagan assassination attempt on 30 March 1981. Here I am, in between skipping talks, admiring the marker commemorating the event.*



*Washington is, of course, awash with really cool places to visit. Here I am at the National Affairs Office of the Church of Scientology, where I had my thetans checked out during my daily walk from the Tabard Inn to the conference several blocks up Connecticut Avenue. Live long and prosper, sweet thetans!*



*I also got to see and hang out with lots of old friends—too many to mention, much less show photos of. Here's one, though—a selfie of Kathy Purcell, Mark Reynolds and moi taken at some big pretentious white MacMansion we ran across on our walking tour of the city. Who lives in places like that, anyway?*



## ARE WE GOING TO COUNT ACORNS OR WHAT?

Yes, we did eventually get around to paying attention to the acorn crop. Indeed, the acorn counting season was longer and more festive than ever. It started on August 23<sup>rd</sup> with a daytrip to Davis to meet former postdoc Ian and spend an afternoon checking out remnant valley oaks among the Ag fields of the Central Valley a couple of days before Ian moved to his new job as a full-time acorn counter with the USFS in Fort Collins, CO.

*Ian searching for oaks lurking in one of the squash fields west of Davis. The idea is to try and detect an effect of isolation on acorn production. No acorns here, at least.*



After a couple of weeks recovering, current postdoc Mario and I met Bill Carmen at Jasper Ridge on September 9<sup>th</sup> where we had a chance to greet new Grand Poobah Tony Barnosky before doing the count there. Tony was a colleague of mine in Integrative Biology at Berkeley, but like me had a two-body problem that was resolved by retiring from UC and taking another job—in his case, running Jasper Ridge for Stanford, where his significant other Liz Hadley is situated. Hopefully having to keep bozos like us from destroying the reserve won't stop Tony from continuing to pursue his interest in using the fossil record to study how China is perpetrating the hoax of global climate change. Just kidding! No one would actually believe a crazy story like that, would they?

Bill, by the way, was fresh from a week at Burning Man, where he once again spent time perfecting his role as the official gin and tonic mixer for the *California Acorn Survey*.



*Bill with one of the residents of Black Rock City, presumably hoping to steal acorns previously stored by giant pleistocene scrub-jays.*

During the subsequent two days Bill, Mario, and I did the Hastings acorn count, an annual event now in its 37<sup>th</sup> (!) year. And yes, there are acorns out there, although there is nothing particularly dramatic about this year's crop. More details on that later, assuming I don't clutter the rest of the report up with more bad poetry.

After yet another short break, Jean joined the party on September 14<sup>th</sup>. We spent the next two days warming up for the big statewide count, which commenced on Saturday with Mario driving us to pick up our rental car in Seaside. From there we drove north and met professional oak-power-couple Adina Merenlender and Kerry Heise for dinner at Piazza de Campovida in Hopland prior to giving a master class in acorn counting at the station's impressive new Rod Shippey Hall.

*Adina and Kerry medicating themselves prior to having to sit through my talk at Hopland. Adina, like me, was trained as a behavioral ecologist but then, unlike me, became a real oakologist. She has been contributing*



*significantly to understanding and conserving California's oak woodlands ever since she joined—in what was an inspired hire—the Integrated Hardwoods Range Management program in 1995.*

*Jean collecting seeds from a California nutmeg, one of the more unusual and interesting tree species at Hopland. If you start reading about exotic nutmeg taking over eastern Nebraska, you'll know where it all started.*



From Hopland, the survey continued on its clockwise trajectory, spending the next night at Dye Creek, where we were able to count our trees despite a armed standoff with potgrowers taking place back in the canyon (by all means please vote YES on Proposition 64!), and then at Sierra Foothills station, where we finished sufficiently early for once to have time to grill steaks outside the bunkhouse.

*One of our recent analyses has focused on “terminal investment”—whether trees differentially invest in reproduction just prior to their demise. This is a problem that has taken quite a few years to acquire a large enough sample size to reasonably address, which is partly why Jean and I chest-bump each other every time one of our trees kicks the bucket. Here’s one of the more dramatic deaths we had in 2016—a blue oak at Dye Creek that just plain gave up the ghost and broke in two near its base.*



We then made the long drive to what is still called Yosemite National Park, but is potentially about to be renamed because of its bizarre trademark fight with Delaware North, which recently lost its concession business there but somehow feels it owns all the names that have been part of the park since it was founded in 1890. My vote is for “Big Rock Candy Mountain Park,” providing the rights to the folk song by the same name, written by Harry McClintock in 1895, is not also “owned” by Delaware North, a company that is solidly on the bandwagon of Making America Great Again through Dickishness.

Continuing south, our next site was the San Joaquin Experimental Range, where once again we were generously hosted by Kathy Purcell and her real-live partner Ken in their fabulous hay bale house overlooking the lights of Madera in the Central Valley. Next up were Kaweah Oaks near Visalia, Three Rivers, and Switzer’s in the San Gabriels high above Pasadena. We then made our descent into LA to Chez Brad et Louise, where we stayed for two nights while we counted at Liebre Mountain and, for the first time in years, added a new site: Malibu State Park in the Santa Monica Mountains.



*Once again I failed to get a nice photo of Louise, to whom we owe a lot for putting up with us (even though it’s required stalking her around the state), so here’s one I took back in 2002. Thanks for everything, Louise! And congratulations for being voted California Acorn Survey’s most valuable player for 2016!*



*Jean at Malibu State Park. I insisted adding this site after belatedly discovering that our statewide sampling of valley oaks excluded the genetically distinct population inhabiting the Santa Monicas. Plus, who can resist the opportunity to see the old M\*A\*S\*H film site? Here’s Jean checking it out on our inaugural visit Sept. 22<sup>nd</sup>.*

Before I forget, thanks to Jonathan Vaughn, the new manager at Kaweah Oaks who was interested in our work and tolerant of our disregard for the reserve’s fences, and to Vilius Zukauskas of the USFS, who once again accompanied us to our black oak site on Liebre Mountain even though the road was, for the first time in several years, actually open. Doing a survey like ours requires the help, or at least tolerance, of a lot of people, so thanks to all of you who continue to put up with our apparently random and often unannounced appearances on sites that you manage one way or another.

*Another item we’re thinking of looking into is the effect of mistletoe on acorn production. Here’s a nice clump growing, somewhat unexpectedly, on a sycamore at Sedgwick. Is it a coincidence that this tree has NEVER produced any acorns? I think not!*



*An item we didn’t pay attention to this year but that was striking nonetheless was the incidence of wasp galls on many of our trees. Here’s an impressive clump of them on one of our blue oaks at Pozo. We do, however, have lots of data from past years. Brian? Ian? Anyone interested in writing that paper?*

## CRUISE TO OAK ISLAND

After 8½ days, including way too many (more than zero) mornings listening to Rush Limbaugh rant on the radio as we drove to our next site, we finally made it back to Carmel Valley after counting at Sedgwick and Pozo on September 25<sup>th</sup>. Jean stayed for another couple of days while we entered data and found a few black oaks to add to our depleted sample size of this species at Hastings, nearly half of the trees we started with having bit the dust over the years. However—this was not the end of the survey! No, no! With Janis off in Minnesota giving talks and visiting Phoebe, I took Mario up on his offer to visit him and Scott Sillett on Santa Cruz Island, where they are engaged in their own acorn survey of coast live and island scrub oaks.

*A selfie of the three of us on Santa Cruz Island enjoying the scenery after counting acorns on 30 September. Santa Cruz Island is a site that always needed to be added to the California Acorn Survey, and it's great that Scott and Mario have done so as part of their studies of Island Scrub-jays. Scott, in case you're wondering, is the serious one on the left.*



*Santa Cruz Island is one of those extraordinary parts of California that is easy to miss, since it's not off either 15 or 101. It's a magical place, however, and well worth the trouble to get there. And it's even got both acorns and Acorn Woodpeckers! What more could you ask for?*



## BURN, BABY, BURN

Even after Santa Cruz Island, we still had Chews Ridge to go, which we had been unable to access earlier because of Soberanes Fire. In case you missed it, the Soberanes Fire was started by an illegal campfire near Big Sur on 22 July and lasted over 2 months during which it burned 132,000 acres, cost \$230 million to fight, and at one point or another threatened Big Sur, Carmel Valley Village (where we're renting for the time being), most if not all of Cachagua, and even parts of Hastings. I'm not sure what the moral is, other than that California is a fire-prone landscape, so pretty much no matter where you live, if you think it can't happen to you, adaptation says you're wrong.

In any case, after Mario got back from the Island Symposium in Ventura we made a run for it and, ignoring the "National Forest Closed" signs, drove to our tanoak site just below Chews Ridge to finally complete this year's survey. No doubt it was our "California Acorn Survey: Official Vehicle" car magnet on the door of my Honda Odyssey that prompted everyone to ignore us long enough to count our trees and get out of there.

*Almost, the resident Hastings woodpecker, congratulating me on the conclusion of the 37<sup>th</sup> California Acorn Survey. And apparently wondering whether I stashed any acorns up my nose. That would explain a lot, I admit.*



## SO TELL ME ABOUT IT

As much as I hate to intrude upon this with some data, it's possible that a few of you are wondering what the acorn crop was like this year, perhaps even more than are looking for the restaurant review, which is the other main section I seem to have avoided so far. As for the latter, we did eat in some interesting places; perhaps the most memorable was Kobe Seafood and Steak House in Redding, where the senior sushi chef—Chuck Wu—not only made an excellent acorn roll but created a "salmon naruto" roll that consisted of salmon sushi wrapped inside thinly-sliced cucumber (in place of sticky rice). It was a new one for us, but definitely memorable.

So; the acorn crop. It was, as I mentioned, pretty unnotable. Valley oaks: not bad; pretty comparable to 2015. Blue oaks: same—also intermediate. Canyon live oaks: really good on Palomar Mountain and the James Reserve in the San Jacintos; fair to good most other places. Coast live oaks: also quite variable—better than last year at Hastings but still fair; fair to good elsewhere except at Sedgwick, where they failed entirely. Black oaks: a relatively bad year, most notably at Liebre Mountain, where the trees are usually loaded. Also failed both at Hastings and at Tower House in Shasta County. Engelmann oak: yet another marginal year at the lovely Santa Rose Plateau. Interior live oak: better than last year but still fair except at Dye Creek, where they did pretty well. Garry oak: yet another good year—we only have one site in Trinity County but those trees rock almost every year. And last but not least: tanoaks. Yet again tanoaks did well at all three sites. Apparently being at least partly insect pollinated allows them to eschew all the variability that we get with the true oaks.

I'm hoping to finally get the summary data on the *California Acorn Survey* website: <http://www.nbb.cornell.edu/wkoenig/wicker/CalAcornSurvey.html> but if you need more specifics, contact me at our new national headquarters in Carmel Valley, or, as always, at <walt@acorns.com>. Just kidding. My real email is somewhere over on the right →.

## POST-FIRE PROGRESS

Speaking of fires, it's time for an update on Rancho Searcho No Moro, which succumbed to the Tassajara Fire on September 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, burning every square inch of our 43 acres and leaving pretty much nothing other than our septic tank. To nobody's surprise, my prediction of being close to having a house again by now in last year's report has turned out to be a tad optimistic. Progress, however, has been made: our shop has been rebuilt and filled with all our stuff from New York, the remains of the old house are gone, we finally have a permit (woo-hoo!), and, even more thrillingly, our friend and neighbor Michael Newton is coming out of retirement to contract the building of the new house. Michael's generous willingness to be in charge may just save our sanity long enough to actually enjoy the new house when it finally gets built.

## WRAP-UP AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

And that is all for the 2016 *California Acorn Report*. We once again gratefully acknowledge support from

the National Science Foundation, which our staff, for the 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, has voted the awesomest science foundation ever.



*Michael in the pit of what's left of Rancho Searcho No Moro on October 13<sup>th</sup>. We are exceedingly grateful to Michael for taking charge of rebuilding, since without him it's possible we wouldn't have a house for years or would go crazy in the process of getting one.*

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As always, keep those cards and letters!

*The California Acorn Survey, founded in 1980, is an international organization dedicated to the understanding of acorn production by California oaks.  
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, Gainesville, FL (2005)  
Xiaoan Zuo & Wenjin Li, Lanzhou, China (2010)  
Eric Walters, Norfolk, VA (2006-2010)  
Maria Dolores Carbonero Muñoz, Pozoblanco, Spain (2013)  
Ian Pearse, Fort Collins, CO (2012-2013, 2015-16)  
Mario Pesendorfer, Jamesburg, CA (2014-2016)  
Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 90-92, 94-98, 2000-16)  
Jean Knops, Lincoln, NE (1993-2011, 2013-2016)  
Walt Koenig, Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2016)

*We also wish to thank our dedicated staff:*

Janis Dickinson (*Chair of Risk Management*)  
Tamara Kaup (*Chief Operations Officer, Nebraska Division*)  
Karen Nardi (*General Counsel*)  
Vince Voegeli (*Commander-in-chief, Hastings Central*)  
Kyle Funk (*Intern, Special Operations*)  
Dale Koenig (*Chief Topologist*)  
Phoebie Koenig (*Beekeeping Specialist*)

*Living in Carmel Valley Village, we're closer to big events on the Monterey Peninsula such as Carmel's centennial anniversary celebration on Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>. Here's Jani Lou—with her ravishing white hair—at the parade. And yes! The guy on the stagecoach in the cowboy hat is indeed Clint Eastwood, the Grand Marshal of the parade. Jealous? Come visit and make our day!*

