
THE TROPER NROCA AINROFILAC

*** REVUS ANNIVERSARY EDITION ***

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The Official Newsletter of the California Acorn Survey©
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AN EMAN WEN?

No, not really. We're just really, really confused, both because we once again failed to make it to the Minnesota State Fair, and hence were unable to attain the state of perfect harmony that is made possible only by competitive minidonut eating, and secondly from finally making the break and dashing around the state counter-clockwise after 10 years of staid conservative clockwise acorn counting. Such unprecedented withershins action, which we performed primarily so that I would at last have the opportunity to use the word "withershins" legitimately in this newsletter, has left the Editor of *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac* so dazed that his computer keyboard has yet to successfully wrestle him back into complacency. The Editor regrets any inconvenience or psychic difficulties this may cause readers, but wishes to remind all of you about laws regarding "Coming to Nuisances." In other words, it's not too late to put down this indulgent piece of satire and read some serious literature such as this week's *TV Guide*.

For those of you still here, the acorn season started on Wednesday, 11 August, when The Editor made his annual trek to the Twin Cities to join Jean for the Cedar Creek Count. As in previous years, we were generously hosted by John Haarstad, Cedar Creek's Resident Naturalist and Wild Woodsman. For once, we had two full days to do all our work, which we didn't really need, especially since it was too early for the State Fair. Equally disturbingly, we couldn't even squander time eating lunch in Isanti at The Creamery, since this icon of Midwestern culinary wonder closed following the bad review we gave it in the 2002 *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac*. Let this be a lesson for all of us; instant mashed potatoes and canned vegetables may not be haute cuisine, but if you complain about the only game in town you must be prepared to suffer the consequences.

In any case, we were stuck making our *own* instant mashed potatoes and opening our *own* cans of vegetables. An insult, to be sure, but c'est la vie. Actually, eating at John's house was fine, since it gave John and Jean ample opportunity to do what they like best, which is to sit outside smoking, drinking, and throwing breadcrumbs to the chickens, who are smart enough not to give bad reviews to any source of sustenance short of Hostess Twinkies (unless they're deep-fried, of course). The

overall ambiance was so decadent that we were regularly joined by other denizens of Cedar Creek, including the station's associate director Clarence Lehman, a bottomless source of trivia you never thought you wanted to know anything about, and Shahid Naeem, a former fellow Berkeleyite in ecology who has since become something of a Big Shot, allowing him to make his living off startup packages from a series of otherwise unsuspecting universities scattered throughout the country. Currently Shahid's at Columbia, where he drives a Cooper Mini and is given cut-rate vacations at large geodesic domes built incongruously in the middle of the Arizona Desert. Quite a deal, I must say.

The big thrill of the visit came on Friday afternoon when I succeeded in talking John, Jean, and Shahid into going to the East Bethel Theater to see a real-live movie. This was not a big deal for Shahid, who lives in a city where the rumor is that they sometimes show movies virtually every night of the week, but it was a pretty big event for me, since taking my family to the movies entails balancing Janis' predilection for artsy films, Phoebe's inherent interest in the adventures of fictional adolescent girls, and Dale's refusal to go to anything that doesn't entail complete and total galactic destruction. It was an even bigger deal for John, who was apparently last dragged to a movie in 1987 to see *Ishtar* and oddly enough has refused to go near a theater since.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure the movie we saw (*The Village*) turned out to be the best choice to bring John back up to speed in terms of the demonstrating how far Hollywood has come in the past 17 years, but what could I do, given that I couldn't convince them to see *Princess Diaries 2*? I can only hope that the extra-large buttered popcorn we all stuffed ourselves with the whole time was enough to convince John of the glories of the modern cinema experience.

The good news is that the movie wasn't so depressing that it stopped John from giving his monthly nature walk on Saturday morning before I left. The walk included a visit to a nearby prairie owned by the Nature Conservancy and a stop at the far shore of Fish Lake, both lovely sites for setting up your very own faux-19th century pseudo-religious community, or has someone thought of that already?

TREADING TIME BETWEEN THE STORMS

Back in California and faced with an unusually long break before the traditional California acorn-counting season started in September, we didn't do much besides get ready for school. I couldn't even talk the kids into pausing their video games long enough to do the Monterey County Fair. I didn't, however, have any difficulty getting them in the car at 5:30 am on 28 August to drive five hours to Magic Mountain, a theme park located in Valencia, a few miles north of my mother's house in the San Fernando Valley. With more gigantic roller-coasters than should be allowed to congregate in the same continent, it's been rumored that the Pentagon at one point considered sending Iraqi prisoners there in order to "encourage" them to talk, only to quickly dismiss the idea as clearly inhumane. Actually, although I hesitate to admit it, I had a pretty good time during those few moments when I wasn't desperately searching for someplace to dispose of my overflowing barf bags.

Even better than all those rides, however, Magic Mountain holds a treasure almost beyond imagination. The treasure is a tree. But not just any tree. It's a tree so big, so ugly, so artificial, and so awful that one has to surmise it was designed as revenge by some drug-crazed anti-environmental lobbyist frustrated by the Bush administration's stubborn insistence on keeping several square feet of untouched wilderness out of developer's hands until after the November election. Particularly impressive is the attempt at branches, which succeeds in making the entire structure look like a giant sequoia growing on a thalidomide-laced hillside. Presumably it was originally at the entrance to Magic Mountain's legendary Deformed and Crippled Concrete Sculpture Garden, but in recent years it's become a sort of alien life form demonstration project (note the giant carrot growing at the base on the left) while it bides its time until someday it decides to keel over, an event that Southern California lawyers and seismologists have been dreaming about for years.



The truly scary part is that the tree has apparently regenerated, yielding several smaller versions of itself a few hundred feet away near the Tidal Wave ride. Perhaps the beginnings of a new, improved National Concrete Forest System? Hey, they're fireproof, you can color-coordinate them with your décor, and they don't pollute like those damn *real* trees. Wait; isn't that the platform of the Republican Party?

Phoebe, on the left, in front of the world's largest and ugliest concrete tree, located at the entrance to Arboriculturist's Nightmare World at Six Flags Magic Mountain.

THE ALIEN INVASION

It took all day before the kids began to slow down, and then it was only because they were so discombobulated by the roller-coasters that they kept on crashing into ATM machines cleverly disguised as miniature palm trees. We spent the night at my mother's house (hi mom!), and on our way back the next morning made a pilgrimage to a famous locality we've all wanted to see ever since I read about it in *The Weekly World News*; yes, I'm talking about the Burbank Flying Saucer crash site.

By an incredibly lucky coincidence, the spacecraft crashed directly into a Fry's Electronics store, where the aliens have since been busy choosing the five free DVDs generously provided as a Welcome to Earth present by the store owners, thus explaining why the so-called "serious" press like Fox Network and even the Santa Cruz Comic News have thus far failed to report this intergalactically significant event. In any case, after waving to the aliens crawling on the walls inside, we all had a good time picking out our favorite electronic toys, including a new flash drive (me), a present for Dale's birthday (Phoebe), and, last but not least, a video game predicated on intergalactic mayhem and destruction (Dale). For once we all agreed: it just doesn't get any better.



Dale and Phoebe in front of Fry's Electronics in Burbank. There you are, thinking everything is just hunky-dory, and then Wham! The next thing you know, a flying

saucer crashes into the building behind you. And those darn aliens don't even fill out their customs forms correctly! It's enough to make you sick. Next thing you know, they'll be demanding overpriced prescription drugs and coverage by bad HMOs just like they're real Americans!

CACHAGUA DINING: AN HISTORICAL GUIDE

Before we move on, I wish to briefly decry what has up until recently been the pathetic dining possibilities of the Cachagua Valley. There has historically been nothing there, and I mean nothing, unless you count searching through the dumpsters behind the wineries. (I hear from the field assistants that the Bernardus dumpster has the best vegetables, in case you're interested.) Even a side-trip to downtown Jamesburg, assuming you know which direction Jamesburg is, would have until recently yielded little of interest to the discriminating culinary palate.

This has now all changed thanks to Michael Jones, a local caterer, who has recently taken over the Cachagua General Store and started serving dinner there on Monday nights. The news spread quickly, and instantaneously Monday night dinner in Cachagua became the place to be and be seen in the fashion-conscious Upper Valley. The food is good to excellent, the price ridiculously low, the service engaging, Michael (who has the enjoyable habit of wandering by and pouring miscellaneous vintage wines just to let customers see what they taste like) invariably lively and affable, and since everyone is there it saves all sorts of time calling people later on in the week to catch up on the local gossip.

The various amenities of the place are almost too many to mention: you can throw horseshoes outside while waiting for a table, check out the latest cowboy and motorcycle outlaw fashions by peeking in the pizzeria next door, pick up a few groceries and a trashy novel from the store on your way out, all the while listening to some of the finest musicians the Upper Valley has to offer who come by and play in hopes that Michael will let them have a reservation for a table the following week. It's even sufficiently close to home that we can sneak out for dinner without the kids even realizing we're gone, although admittedly they're now at an age where they'd mostly rather we left indefinitely rather than for just a couple of hours. All in all, it's an experience like none other in the area, much less the snootier appellations of Carmel and Monterey. A highly prized four acorn establishment. Put in on your calendar.



Counterclockwise from the right: locals Ben and Cate help Janis (vowing "my next husband will be normal!") and yours truly celebrate our 17th anniversary at the Cachagua Store on 9 August. 17th anniversary? I

don't believe it; we're all so incredibly young and good looking! Next thing you know you're going to tell me I've been counting acorns for 25 years...

THE SILVER ANNIVERSARY FINALLY ARRIVES

Well yes, as it happens, we HAVE been counting acorns for 25 years. Amazing, isn't it? But it's true. It was yet another goddamn perfect day in paradise (GDPDIP) back on 4 October 1980 when Ron and I tagged and counted our first tree up on the Arnold, finishing three days and 250 trees later at Red House and the tinkling of Bill's inimitable gin and tonics.



Walt and the Mildew Hat™ consult with Dale on the 1990 Hastings acorn count. It was a bad year, perhaps in part because Dale couldn't count higher than 2. In retrospect, I suppose it might have helped if he'd known what an acorn was.

A lot of acorns counted since then; exactly 118,277 (at Hastings) to be precise. A lot of other changes as well, given that Jean was 8 years old when we started and I didn't even meet Janis until 1985. Another five years after that and it looked briefly like I was going to be able to get Dale interested in taking over (see photo). Unfortunately, this didn't last much longer than his willingness to take baths with our friends' daughters. Now, after another 15 years, one thing is clear: both my kids would rather die than have to admit to any of their friends that they are saddled with a father who counts acorns for a living. What *is* the matter with kids today, anyway? They're bratty, ungrateful, and act as if their parents are complete losers. We, on the other hand, were bratty, ungrateful, and mostly worried that *we* were complete losers. If those two match up somehow, I *don't* want to know about it. Now go back to your room and don't come out for 15 minutes.

THE BLACK MAMBA GOES ON A MISSION FROM GOD

As many of you will recall, two years ago Jean rented a gargantuan white Lincoln Towncar (fondly known as the Pimpmobile) for the survey. This year he was so appalled by the Yugo sedan that Hertz tried to foist off on him that he actually paid extra for another Towncar, this time a black number loaded with indispensable extras like an automatic trunk (so you never again—god forbid—have to expend precious calories closing the trunk), a moonroof (to facilitate acorn counting on the fly), and, best of all, a GPS unit complete with all of California, the Yellow Pages, and even a AAA guide. Known as the Black Mamba, the vehicle had so many horses under the hood that it could pass other cars going uphill at Warp-drive speeds the USS Enterprise could only ever dream about. The downside was that the unfettered oil production of the entire Sudan was needed to maintain its bloated, obscene perkiness; one could almost feel the climate warming as one drove. This perhaps explains the ticker-tape trading information concerning oil stocks and Saudi crude on the GPS unit, displayed conveniently along with current Las Vegas odds for Bush invading all major middle-eastern countries he hasn't already gotten to. In case there was any doubt, all bets are on Iran, which shares 3 (count them, 3!) letters with *both* Afganistan and Iraq, and is therefore clearly a national security threat.

The Acorn Brothers (from the right: Jean, Bill, and yours truly) discuss their impending Mission from (the acorn) God in front of



the Black Mamba. I don't know how he does it, but no matter what fashion statement we try to make, Bill somehow outshines the

rest of us. He obviously missed his calling: he should have been a Victoria's Secret model.

Not only did the Black Mamba zip through those miles on the freeways, but she was also surprisingly nimble on dirt roads, at least as long as we slowed down to a glacial crawl and had someone out in front sweeping away any obstruction on the road more than 2" high to accommodate its super-sized low-riding physique. More fun was the challenge of stumping the GPS, which communicated via a soothing female voice in combination with various computer "ding-dings," "ding-dongs," and (we had to watch out for this one) "dong-dings." "Ding-dings" meant keep going and were thus viewed as affirmations of our basic worldview. "Ding-dongs" put you on notice that you were supposed to exit the freeway or turn the stated direction, and were considered unthreatening. The dreaded "dong-dings," on the other hand, meant you were no longer traveling in the correct direction, and were invariably followed by an increasingly menacing series of announcements that we should "please make a legal U-turn at your earliest convenience." This was a problem from the start, since the GPS lady was clearly not programmed to accept counter-clockwise driving. We kept waiting for her to lose her patience and say something like "how many times do I have to tell you to turn around?" "go back, asshole," and, last but not least, "you have 5 more seconds to stop or I'm calling the withershins police."

We never got quite that far, but it was fun to confuse her, which seemed to work best once we left the paved roads (although a lot of forest service roads were, amazingly enough, programmed into the unit) and then entered that we wanted to go someplace in the exact opposite direction we were currently headed. This would mess up her circuits to the extent that she would plead with us to make a (legal) U-turn long after we already had done so, sometimes punctuated with a concerned "please return to the highlighted route as soon as possible" and, of course, a never-ending series of "dong-dings." Eventually, however, she would figure out what was up and be back prodding us in her usual Zen-like fashion to "prepare to exit on the right" followed by a reassuring "ding-dong" just as the exit veered off the freeway. Jean really liked it because it helped him find coffee in the morning, but, like much of the American engineering that was clearly lavished on the Black Mamba, my own unbiased opinion was that it was a hideously expensive alternative to a \$14.95 California atlas and, like cell phones, the work of the Devil, with the exception of the GPS lady's voice, which would have been wonderful to listen to if only we could have programmed her read something soothing like the *Canterbury Tales* instead of always bugging us to make legal U-turns. Of course, I'm the kind of guy who rather likes getting lost as a test of character. For the rest of you, go ahead and get one; it won't help you find me, I can promise you that.

LET'S COUNT!

The Hastings count was attended by more than the usual complement of international observers this year, with

Victoria Sork and Delphine Grivet from UCLA, Peter Smouse from Rutgers, and a bevy of grad students interested in valley oak gene flow and seed dispersal here for a visit and power meeting. Meanwhile, Jean and I were joined by Jay McEntee, one of my fall woodpecker assistants, for the 3rd annual tanoak survey up at Chews Ridge, after which we did the Hastings Acorn Survey Silver Anniversary Edition. The survey was spread out over Friday, Saturday (at which point Bill finally joined us) and Sunday, and included not only the usual leaf collecting and dendrometer readings but also the changing of the first set of iButtons, one of which has been on each of the 85 valley oaks since last year's survey quietly taking temperatures every 4 hours.

Otherwise, there's not a whole lot to report from the Hastings side of things. Most of the trees were still there. One (valley oak #35, the old Bianca granary) finally bit the dust, a mere 13 years after we first recorded it as "almost completely dead" during the 1991 survey. This somber loss, which we noted with 30 seconds of silence during the time we would otherwise have counted acorns, reduces our Hastings survey to 239 survivors from the original 250. Losses have included 3 valley, 2 blue, 1 coast live, and 5 California black oaks.

Life, however, goes on, and we here at the *California Acorn Survey* are working hard to exploit such misfortunes to the greatest extent possible. Specifically, we are hoping to use these senseless deaths, in combination with those suffered by trees at our other sites, to answer the question: Do trees that are about to die invest more heavily in reproduction? This is of those classic urban myths, right up there with the check is in the mail, I'll call you, and the Iraqis will spread rose petals in front of our troops, that a scary number of people believe despite a total and complete lack of supporting data, or any data whatsoever. There do appear to be a couple of anecdotal references I've run across, but otherwise, the closest I've come so far is the apparent tendency for several species of trees (including tanoaks), to produce lots of seeds after girdling. The problem here is that girdling, by cutting the phloem and cambium layers, reduces or eliminates the ability of the trees to transfer resources down to the roots. Stuck in the leaves, it's not surprising that such trees end up producing lots of seeds before they eventually run out of resources and die. What we want to know, however, is whether trees that are about to buy the farm actually shift resources into reproduction as an adaptive last-gasp strategy, not because they are stopped from shifting them back down to the roots.

Being exactly the kind of obscure scientific issue the *California Acorn Survey* loves to squander its time investigating, I thought I'd make a rare diversion into real science and see what our data say. Thus far, we have 28 trees that have gone to oak heaven. Of these, 11 are valley or blue oaks, 7 are black oaks, and the other 10 are spread out among the various other species we cover.

Combining all 28 individuals, the results are thus far not exactly ironclad but the direction is pretty clear: trees that are about to die are likely to produce fewer, not more, acorns than those that are not. Of the 28 trees, 21 produced *fewer* acorns the last year of their life than the average conspecific at the same site, a difference that was even more pronounced (and actually significant) the year prior to their last year, when 22 of 27 trees produced fewer acorns than the mean conspecific at the same site. Even more dramatically is their subsequent productivity: absolutely none of the 28 trees produced more than the mean number of acorns *after* they died! Trends are basically the same for valley/blue oaks and for black oaks when separated out, although sample sizes are proverbially low.



Black oak #41 up on the Arnold, an example of the 11 casualties suffered at Hastings since it was invaded in 1980. (We'll find those WMDs eventually, I'm sure.) This big guy fell following the 2001 insurgent attack, a good year in which we counted

62 acorns compared to the mean of 35 for all other black oaks that year. This trend of high fecundity prior to their demise does not appear to be typical; for the most part, dying trees appear to act pretty much like you'd kind of expect a tree is bad shape to act: not terribly interested in reproduction.

So, although the definitive answer awaits more errant surgical strikes by those SCUD missiles that never miss, it's not looking good for the urban myth: trees that are about to die generally appear to act like, well, shitty trees, rather than trees that are giving it the old college try before crashing into oblivion. And after they're dead, let me tell you, they don't do *squat!* While you're waiting for the conclusion to this saga, please do keep your eyes open for references to this (most likely fallacious) concept, and send them to the *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac*. Not only will we temporarily suspend the (totally nominal) \$100 processing fee, but we will even consider publishing your obituary after you die, assuming we are able to reconstruct enough of your sex life to test if you went out with a bang, as it were.

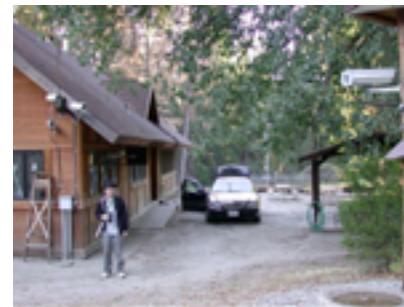
SEVEN DAYS

And so it was yet another GDPDIP as Jean and I (guided by the GPS lady) headed out at 8 am on Monday, 13 September and—yes it's true—turned *left* at Carmel Valley Road (despite the “please make a legal U-turn at your earliest convenience”) to kick off the 11th annual *California Acorn Survey* and 1st annual *California Acorn Withershindig*. After a day or two we (and the GPS lady) got used to going counter-clockwise, the trickiest part being the need to carefully check our route to ensure that we didn't forget a site altogether. In fact, I'm *still* hoping we didn't forget a site. If you happen across any acorns that should have been counted, please let us know ASAP.

Heading south, Day 1 took us to Pozo followed by Sedgwick. We'd originally planned on staying there for the night (especially since Victoria and the valley oak seed dispersal crowd had moved down there for the evening), but having finished fairly early and feeling the *wunderlust* that only acorn-counting fulfills, we pressed on, eventually having dinner in Santa Barbara and spending the night at a motel in Mission Hills, where, by a remarkable coincidence, *The Blues Brothers* was showing on TV. Day 2 started with Switzer's, moved to the ever-lovely Santa Rosa Plateau, and ended with a gambling intermission at the Pala Casino on the way up to Palomar Mountain State Park. Jean, by the way, made out like a bandit at the \$1 poker slot machines, scoring 4 Jacks to win \$25 and ending up with a net gain of \$23. Given our recent success obtaining funding from more traditional venues, which I will refrain from discussing in detail only because we continue to cling to the faint hope that they will see the error of their ways and give us money in the future, gambling started to look like perhaps the best option for supporting the *California Acorn Survey* after all.

Day 2 ended with our newest, and at the risk of Jean making me smoke one of his disgusting Dutch cigars, final, addition to the statewide survey: the James Reserve in the San Jacinto Mountains above Idyllwild. On the reserve we added a population of black oaks and canyon live oaks, while down the road a few miles we marked and counted a set of coast live oaks.

I insisted on adding the James Reserve in order to keep tabs on an amazing project that Mike Hamilton (of the reserve) and Chuck Taylor (at UCLA) have going whose goal is to make James the world's first virtual reserve. The idea is to have all data taken remotely by embedded sensors that will automatically upload data to the web, thus, for the first time, sparing researchers the need to snap out of their drunken stupors in order to go out and collect field data.



No, it's not your imagination; Big Brother IS watching you. Jean and the Black Mamba under surveillance by multiple web-cams in front of the Trailfinder's Lodge at the James Reserve. In fact, BB

is not only watching; He's trying to figure out how to listen as well: the plan is eventually to develop microphone arrays capable of identifying sounds to who, what, and where.

Whether this is a good thing or not may be one of those issues that philosophers will debate for generations, but ready or not, Mike, with the help of enough grant money to fund the *California Acorn Survey* for the next several millennia, is well on the way to making it a reality. At the James Reserve, this includes a lot of extremely high-tech

bluebird boxes, aerial tramways overflowing with miscellaneous sensors, and a frightening array of webcams watching one's every move. You can, for example, relive this year's acorn counting experience by going to <http://www.jamesreserve.edu/webcams.lasso> and clicking on the "Crazies Counting Acorns" camera. You can also watch Jean smoke one of his Dutch cigars with the "Cigar Smoking" camera and, if that's too exciting for you, watch mold grow on the Mildew Hat™ with the "MildewCam." OK, I'm making this up, but not by much; check out the "MossCam" for action the likes of which can't be matched by anything short of an Andy Warhol film retrospective.

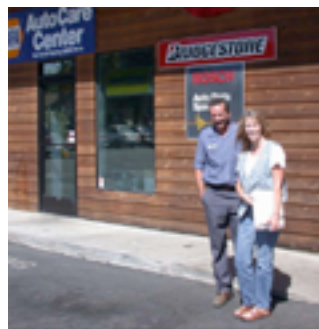
My involvement in this endeavor, by the way, has to do with facilitating a microphone array at Hastings that will automatically detect and identify the calls of individually marked Acorn Woodpeckers, which are being recorded as we speak by Yuan Yao, a grad student from Chuck's lab at UCLA. Whether this might eventually replace the field assistants we currently employ to cover up our drunken stupors may be debatable, but the advantages of being able to sit in my hottub and say "Oh, and I forgot: no stored acorns at Road 3 today at 10 am" and have the microphone array capture the message, identify me, and post it all on the web where both I and the Homeland Security Office can study the data is undeniable.

...AND THEN YOU DIE

The last two subtitles are not only obscure references to a movie you probably missed, but also acknowledgment of the brutal schedule we here at the *California Acorn Survey* had to maintain in order to complete the survey in the allotted amount of time. This feat was made more difficult by several factors, including adding the new site, going counter-clockwise, and having to listen to the GPS lady bitch about our driving the whole way. After making it to the James Reserve for the night of Day 2, we headed northwest via San Bernardino and Palmdale to Liebre Mountain, which was untouched despite a fire that had burned up most of Pine Canyon and a firebreak at our black oak site that looked like it had been made by a monster bulldozer convention. We then continued on to Visalia, where we counted at Kaweah Oaks, and Three Rivers, where we spent the night at the Holiday Inn Express.

We generally did a terrible job meeting up with people this year, our main excuse being that, since we were following a new schedule, we had no idea when we would be anywhere. However, after counting along the South Fork of the Kaweah River on Day 4 we were able to visit briefly with Mark and Vernessa Johnson in Coarsegold before moving on to the San Joaquin Experimental Range and down to Yosemite Valley, where we finished just in time to head up to Crane Flats to camp. Mark, of course, was our Reserve Steward until last spring when he suddenly sold his house in Asoleado, bought a car repair shop up in the Sierra foothills conveniently located along the route of the *California Acorn Survey*, and abandoned

all the glitz and glamour of Hastings for the laid-back world of car repair. Actually, according to Mark when he left, his goal was to spend his time sitting out in front of the shop smoking the cigars Jean had given him over the years that he'd never had time for at Hastings while the real repair guys, of whom he's now in charge, did all the work. Unfortunately for him, with Vernessa working hard doing the books and their son Craig doing grunt work back in the shop, Mark has to feign doing some work himself, which, the day we visited, consisted primarily of driving around picking up parts. We wish them all well, apologize for visiting in a vehicle that scared away all the potential customers, and hope Mark gets a chance to smoke those cigars before Jean brings up another box next year.



Proud new owners Vernessa and Mark Johnson at Coarsegold Car Care, located, by another of those fortunate coincidences, in Coarsegold, California. A nice shop, although it would certainly benefit by having a flying saucer crashed into the front. But then, what store wouldn't?

THE ANNUAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Before going any further, it would seem prudent to get to this, the most anticipated section of the *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac*, before I run out of space. Our new improved schedule ensured that we sampled several new restaurants this year, thus allowing you the readers to keep up with the fast-changing world of California cuisine.

Bay Café, 131 Anacapa Street, Santa Barbara

We took immediate advantage of our omniscient GPS unit on the first day after counting at Sedgwick to find what sounded like a very promising restaurant in Santa Barbara. The Bay Café is on the "Oceanside of Highway 101" and touts "patio dining" of a sort that appealed to both of us after a grueling day of counting acorns. The good news is that the atmosphere was indeed very relaxing. Indeed, sitting out on the patio surrounded by palm trees and blue fluorescent lights listening to the live band playing what we could only guess was blues/fusion music while the sun set had the unmistakable charm of being at a tropical beach café above Hilo Bay on the Big Island drinking Mai-Tais while waiting for a tidal wave to funnel up and wash away the city. The bad news was that the patio overlooked a parking lot, not the Pacific Ocean. Nonetheless, there wasn't much traffic and it was still pretty nice.

As for the food, well, it may not have been all that great, but it sure was expensive. Jean got oysters on the halfshell (farm raised; very nice, albeit at \$2 a pop) and salmon/halibut ceviche, while I got what I believe was the cheapest entrée on the menu, the calamari steak (\$13.95). The latter was kind of soft and limp and came with a

serving of garlic/basil mashed potatoes that was disconcertingly green, yet not particularly tasty. Meanwhile, Jean didn't even finish his ceviche, while my half-lemonade, half-ice tea (which our waiter was kindly able to identify as an "Arnold Palmer") was clearly composed of at least one ingredient (whether it was the lemonade or the tea I'm not sure) that was made from a mix. The entire experience set us back nearly \$60, which might have been OK but only if that tidal wave had come in after all and cleared out the parking lot. **Rating: 2 acorns.**

Todd's Pizza Factory, Three Rivers

We've had some bad dining experiences in Three Rivers over the years, with the exception of 2002 when we succeeded in hooking up with Eric Knapp who was kind enough not only to put us up for the night but prepare a great dinner for us as well. This time we were all set to go to what sounded like the primo dining spot in town, assuaging some of Jean's grumpiness after not having finished counting acorns until late in the day, when some overweight bozo at the Holiday Inn Express where I was getting a room claimed that the pizza place across the road was "totally fantastic." Did this sound likely? No, it did not. But I had to suggest we check it out; such recommendations can, after all, lead to the kind of out-of-the-way, unexpected diamonds you, our readers, have come to expect from the *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac*. As it happens, the aforementioned pizza place was a Pizza Factory ("we toss'em; they're awesome"). Being a chain, this made the dazzling recommendation given by the porker over at the Holiday Inn Express about as likely as Dick Cheney becoming a life member of the Sierra Club. It was late, however, so we persisted nonetheless.

To make a long story short: it wasn't worth it. The pizza was OK; among other things, the crust, which they actually do toss by hand, was very good and I have to give credit to any eating establishment in which tables are cleared off by someone pushing around a big red garbage can on wheels. But really; "totally fantastic"? This was clearly the kind of guy who regards the environmental policies of the Bush administration "fair and balanced." Please, America! It's time to move on. **Rating: 1 acorn.**

Buz's Crab, 2159 East St., Redding

I can hardly even begin to describe how promising Buz's looked. First off, it's in a nowhere place. (Redding? How likely is a great crab shack in Redding?) Second, it's off in what would clearly be the slums of Redding, if Redding had slums, which it probably doesn't. Third, how many places have either fresh ono or guys out in front cleaning bucketfuls of Dungeness crabs? And finally, the price was right: the oysters were half what they were at the Bay Café. If ever there was a place I wanted to max out with acorns, this was it.

Unfortunately, despite all these promising signs, the food was, well, just not very good. We even tried it twice: first for dinner before camping at Whiskeytown, and then for

lunch on the way back to Hopland the next day, an unprecedented condescension on the part of the *California Acorn Survey* team engineered to ensure that our opinion of the place wasn't tainted by the allergic reaction I had the first evening to the Smirnoff Ice I drank with dinner. But it was true: the seafood was not cooked very well, the salad was marginal, and the tartar sauce that came with the fish truly pathetic. It was unbelievably sad. In fact, I'm still tempted to give it yet another chance next year, at least if they again have the Maine lobster special. But unless things change and they get a more inspired cook, I fear the answer will be the same: Buz's is pretty much what you'd expect a seafood place in Redding to be, not the gourmet international seafood center we were hoping for. **Rating: 2 acorns.**

Lucky Fortune Seafood Restaurant, 5715 Geary Blvd., San Francisco

We had pretty much given up for the week until we ended up in San Francisco for lunch on the last day before finishing the survey at Jasper Ridge. The GPS lady gave Jean a lead on a Thai restaurant that sounded promising, but unfortunately, being Sunday, it was closed. We proceeded to wander down Geary, passing a couple of dim sum places that were so packed we couldn't get in. After a block or two we found the Lucky Fortune, which looked quite promising even though it was only half-full, especially after noting that we were the only Anglos in the whole place and that everything was in Chinese except for the "Exit" sign in front of the door.

The Lucky Fortune was modest in size, and so, unlike the large dim sum houses in Chinatown, there aren't people carrying around large trays of indecipherable food items that you grab as they go by. Instead, there's a menu from which you order the indecipherable food items that are then brought to your table several at a time. Jean, who's an old hand at weird Chinese food, ordered 10, including a wide range of both old standbys like steamed pork buns and deep-fried sesame seed balls together with several more adventurous choices including sticky rice wrapped in lotus leaf, pan fried turnip cakes, and (my personal favorite) jelly fish and smoked pig shank. Minutes later dishes started pouring out of the back and onto our table until there was no more room on the table and I begged our waitress to stop.

And what a feast it was! Both of us stuffed ourselves with some of the best and certainly most diverse dim sum I've had anywhere. In the end, we had 3 boxes of leftovers not including piles of turnip cakes and jelly fish, which I just wasn't able to make room for. And all for a grand total of \$33, including the tip. I admit that there's a small place in Carmel that my family likes to go where the dim sum is comparable, but you can barely order steamed rice and eggrolls there for that price. Could those places up the street that were packed be even better? Hard to imagine, but maybe we'll get a chance to look into the possibility next year. **Rating: 3 acorns wrapped in lotus leaves and 1 pig shank.**

AND THE CROP IS...?

Once again I seem to have successfully made it almost to the end without saying a thing about the acorn crop itself. So here it goes: it's good, particularly for valley oaks and blue oaks. It's certainly way better than last year, and mostly as good as it was back in 2002. At Hastings, for example, we counted an average of 46.7 acorns per tree (in 30 s) on the valley oaks, compared to 0.4 last year and 42 in 2002. Ditto, more or less, for the blue oaks. Coast live oaks? mediocre; much better than last year (not saying much), but way below the banner year of 2000. Meanwhile, the 2-year species were mixed. At Liebre Mountain we counted a mean of 24.4 black oak acorns per tree compared to 10.4 last year and 105.7 in 2001 (an all-time record, by the way). Interior live oaks were similarly intermediate, while canyon live oaks were generally pretty bad. Overall, we counted a mean of 25.1 acorns per tree on 1051 trees for a grand total of 26,445 acorns. This makes it a fairly good year overall, but nothing to get too worked up about.

On the other hand, it is a good enough crop here at Hastings that we've had 3 fall nests, which is always pretty exciting. The last time we had any fall nests at all was 2000, and in total we've only had fall nests (that we knew about, anyway) in 9 out of the last 30 years. Such fall nesting, which is only one of the many, many things that makes Acorn Woodpeckers so special, only happen in good acorns years. All 3 nests this year got started around the middle of August and the last will fledge the first week of October. However, we've had 10 nests over the years that were initiated in September, with the latest (successful) nest being Road 3's back in 1979, which was started about mid-September and fledged two kids just in time to go trick-or-treating on Halloween.

THE BLACK MAMBA RETIRES

The end of the survey got a bit strange when it rained (!) the last night while we were staying at Hopland. Fortunately, it cleared up the next day, allowing us to successfully have lunch in San Francisco and still finish the count that day. We finally rolled back home at 10:07 pm on Sunday the 19th.

Thanks to the GPS lady, we are herewith able to report, for the first time, exact statistics for the trip. The total distance we traveled was 2117.1 miles. Total trip time was 174 hours and 45 minutes, of which 47 hours and 38 minutes were spend driving at an average speed of 44.6 mph. Excluding Hastings and Chews Ridge, which we did before we left, this means we counted 8.74 acorns per mile, or 105.9 acorns per hour. Whether that's a world speed record or not, I'm not sure, but it certainly should be. Where's a copy of the *Guinness Book of World Acorn Records* when you need it?



Jean, finally tiring of acorns, counts sheep at Hopland the last day of the survey. Why sheep? We've never been able to figure that one out. In the past, they made sense as an excuse to have a few lamas (including Dolly, the mascot of the

California Acorn Survey). But now, with the lamas penned up near headquarters, it appears as though these guys are actually serious about being at the forefront of the California sheep industry, a scary thought that ranks up there with leading the California acorn-counting movement.

TROPER NROCA AINROFILAC PERSONALS

S/W/M, 33, w/ exotic foreign accent, recently divorced but with tenure, seeks S/F 25-40 interested in invasive plants, carbon sequestration, mechanisms leading to biological diversity, and smoking stale Dutch cigars. Willingness to wear funny hats and participate in satanic acorn-counting rituals a plus. Send photo and reprints to the *California Acorn Survey*, Box 14333, 348 Manter Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588.

WRAP-UP AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

That's all for this year. The *Troper Nroca Ainrofilac*, AKA the *California Acorn Report*, is owned and operated by the California Acorn Survey Corporation, a division of Halliburton Acorn Services International. We always invite your comments, although we're just as likely to ignore them next year as we did this time around. As usual, contact us at:

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The California Acorn Survey© was founded in 1980 and is made up of a vast, nationwide network of, oh, about a half-dozen people dedicated to understanding patterns of acorn production by California oaks. Members (with years of participation) include

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-83)
Mark Stanback, Davidson, NC (1989-90, 1992)
Elizabeth Ross-Hooge, Gustavus, AK (1991)
Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 90-92, 94-98, 2000-04)
Jean Knops, Lincoln, NE (1993-2004)
Walt Koenig, Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2004)