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# THE CALIFORNIA ACORN REPORT

## Taco Anniversary Edition

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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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### SPRING FEVER

Welcome to this year's *California Acorn Report*. This is the 30<sup>th</sup> year—the Taco Anniversary, if I'm not mistaken—of the *California Acorn Survey*. It's not the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *California Acorn Report*, presumably because there was a short delay (17 years, but who's counting?) before the editorial office got its act together and put out the first newsletter back in 1997. But still, as modest as I am, I have to admit that after 30 years of counting I deserve warm, personal heartfelt congratulations from myself for a job well done, or at least a job done for a very, very, long time. With a total of 371,646 acorns counted so far, I'm taking the rest of the day off whether you like it or not.

OK; time to get back to work. Much has happened since last year when I wrote from my new office at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in lovely Ithaca, New York. I officially retired from my position at UC Berkeley in October, and am now Acorn Counter Emeritus. Without going into the sordid details, it would appear that as much as I regret no longer being a cornerstone of the University of California system this may have happened at just the right time given the financial state of the great state of California, which turns out to have been supporting itself by means of a ponzi scheme for the past 20 years. In fact, it appear that the University may, at least for the time being, no longer be able to afford its own in-house acorn counter, and thus my old position is likely to remain unfilled for the time being.

The good news is that this resulted in the School House, the home of gin and tonics for the *California Acorn Survey* almost since its inception in 1980, sitting vacant and waiting patiently for me to move back in when I finished teaching my Advanced Behavioral Ecology course at Cornell in mid-March to check up on the oaks and help band this year's crop of baby acorn woodpeckers. With the help of Craigslist, a guy at Fort Ord heading for Afghanistan, and Mark Stromberg who help me move it all, the School House once again awaits any of you who wish to visit, at least between mid-March and mid-July when I'm around for the breeding season, or (needless to say) during September when the acorn-counting festivities are in full swing.



*A sad-looking School House denuded by the neutron bomb I set off after the 2008 survey. However, the floor still looks pretty good after having refinished it back in 1982, if I do say so myself.*



*A much cheerier living room in July 2009 after I bought some furniture and moved in much of the stuff stored in the garage over the winter including a coffee table, curtains, wall decorations, our spring field assistants, one grad student (Emily) from Canada, and Janis (in front of the window). Nice of them to squeeze in there all that time; hopefully they had a chance to band some of the bats while they were there.*

In celebration of having a California house again, not to mention getting support from NSF for the *California Acorn Survey*, I decided it was time to go all out and order new magnetic car stickers. As you may recall, the old design was not only pretty clunky but had an unfortunate tendency to blow off the car door as soon as we got out the driveway. So, looking around the vestiges of my Hastings office, I eventually settled on the fabulous papercut that Marni Koopman, one of Janis's former bluebird assistants who is now a climate change scientist with the USFWS, made for the Behavioral Ecology meeting we ran at Asilomar back in 1998. A quick digital photo followed by some basic Photoshopping and voilà!



*The Spanish version of the new magnetic stickers now adorning vehicles in the California Acorn Survey fleet. If the translation is actually a commentary about our mothers' sex lives, I don't want to hear about it. Also, please keep your eyes open—there's a free one-year subscription to the California Acorn Report to anyone who recovers the one that blew off the car somewhere along I5 between Sacramento and Redding.*

As it happens, this was not the only big event at Hastings this spring. Showing up shortly after I arrived in mid-March was none other than Ron Mumme, the co-Founder of the Hastings Division of the *California Acorn Survey*. Ron, who retired from acorn counting back in 1983 to get a life, now teaches at Allegheny College, a small reform school located only a few short hours away from Ithaca in Meadville, Pennsylvania. However, being on sabbatical, he came and helped us out with our fairly lame attempts thus far to get mate-guarding behavior in the woodpeckers—something we haven't done successfully since Ron last did it as a grad student 25+ years ago. In the process, Ron kept me company in the yet-to-be-refurnished School House until the rest of his family came out to post bail and recover him in mid-April. Thanks Ron, and come back anytime!



*Ron (back right) and his wife Sarah (far right) trying to bait their daughter Rhodo (beginning to make her move on the back left) on the School House deck just before Ron left in mid-April. Eyeing me with an appropriately skeptical eye is Janis (far left), who came out for a week to see if we had been doing anything besides partying all spring. (The answer, needless to say, was no.)*

The other big event of the spring was the expansion of the phenology study, designed to determine the relationship between weather, phenology, pollination, and acorn production in valley oaks. Part of this involved setting up pollen traps at not one, not two, but three sites—Hastings, Jasper Ridge, and Sedgwick—after which we needed to both check phenology of the valley oaks and replace the tape in the traps once a week all spring. Fortunately, I was able to enlist Kyle Funk, one of our winter woodpecker assistants from UC Santa Cruz (and a former assistant of Dai Shizuka, another one of Janis's distinguished former field assistants who is now finishing his Ph.D. at UCSC with Bruce Lyon). And it's a good thing, both that I was able to enlist him and that he was up to the task, since it turned out to be one heck of a lot of work figuring out how to do all this stuff while driving both Jasper Ridge (100 miles north) and Sedgwick (200 miles south) every week for two months. We can only hope that it all ends up being worth it. Kyle went on to collect data on flowering of the valley oaks at Hastings and do what's shaping up to be a very interesting project on herbivory on valley oak leaves. The latter was conducted along with Tom Kraft, a fabulous undergrad from my behavioral ecology course (and son of one of Janis's colleagues in DNR at Cornell) whose summer plans to achieve the perfect tan fortunately dovetailed impeccably with coming to Hastings to help us out with woodpeckers and oaks. Thanks Tom, and we

hope to see you out there again next year!



*Kyle posing with one of our new pollen traps (on top of the structure above his left arm) at the Hastings RAWS weather station just before it took off on its own and flew back to its mother ship. We can only hope those aliens will be better at identifying all those pollen grains than we are.*

## SUMMER CRUISIN'

After last year's fires, summer in California was relatively quiet. Janis and Phoebe came out near the end of June to attend a poetry workshop at Tassajara, after which Phoebe went home while Janis finished out her WEBL field season and then made a brief sojourn to Yosemite with me followed by the red-eye back to New York. Otherwise, the major summer event was the first *California Acorn Survey* cruise, a 4-day affair in the Bahamas that Janis and I took with her family for her mom's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Admittedly, we didn't see many acorns, but it sure was fun smuggling in that *California Acorn Survey* sign and getting it onto the funnel of the ship.



Your editor, always eager to explore new study sites, gives the “Live long and count” sign to the friendly Nassau natives while the Norwegian Acorn—the official yacht of the California Acorn Survey—sports one of our new magnetic cruise ship stickers (English version) in the background.

## THE ANNUAL AUTUMNAL FESTIVAL OF ACORN ENUMERATION

Meanwhile, all those acorns, whose patience was beginning to wear thin, finally began to get counted during the last week in August when I flew to Milwaukee (ostensibly to see my brother Bill, the famous actuary) and then rented a car and drove to Cedar Creek in Minnesota, where Jean was busy meeting with He Who Shall Not Be Named to help determine how to set the time on the latter’s newest Rolex. With John Harstaad no longer with us (see below), there isn’t a lot to report regarding the Minnesota Division of the *California Acorn Survey*. There were some acorns—actually, it was a pretty good year for bur oaks—but otherwise we didn’t go out to eat and I didn’t have time to hang out with any of the survey’s friends and relatives who live in the Twin Cities. Jean and I did take one afternoon off and go see District 9, which I found quite disturbing—you’d think *someone* would have said something about a huge space ship hovering over Johannesburg for the past 20 years before now—but otherwise we mostly spent the time counting acorns and enjoying the legendary herds of tiger beetles cruising along the sand paths on the station.

*Sally the tiger beetle, the official carnivore of the California Acorn Survey (Minnesota Division), searching for victims on the road near Cedar Creek Bog. And yes, it’s hard to see but that IS a California Acorn Survey sticker on its right elytron; it’s amazing what nanotechnology can do these days.*



As usual, we took a brief break after counting at Cedar Creek to rest up and celebrate my daughter Phoebe’s

birthday. We also took a nice hike along the Finger Lakes trail and had a couple of nice dinners, but otherwise I mostly spent the next week meditating and exercising my fingers in order to keep them in shape for the counting festivities to come.



*Phoebe and I read our favorite book—“I love you Good Night” by J. Buller and S. Shade—in honor of her 17th birthday Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>. I love you like bears love kisses and cuddles...!*

Finally it was time for the California Division of the *California Acorn Survey*. As in 2008, my defection to Cornell necessitated a finely-tuned rendezvous in San Francisco. So, on Sept. 9<sup>th</sup>, I flew from Ithaca to SFO and was met by my son Dale, who had been entrusted with the Green Giant (our Mazda MPV, now already a veteran of two previous *California Acorn Surveys*), following which we tracked down Jean, who arrived only shortly thereafter from his home in Soybean, Nebraska. Things went downhill from there as we wandered aimlessly in the vicinity of the airport looking for a bookstore so Dale would have something to read on the train during his trip home. Sorry Dale; next time I promise to have Serena, the nice lady who lives inside the GPS unit I eventually bought later on during the trip at Costco, guide us to a nearby Borders.

After dropping off Dale we met up with Bill Carmen for lunch and then headed to Jasper Ridge for the first leg of the count. The good news is that we finally succeeded in figuring out how to get iButton<sup>®</sup> data—small automatic temperature recorders that we’ve been using for several years to determine environmental conditions at individual trees—from all our valley oaks: put two of them on each tree, check them in January to ensure both are working, and with luck at least one will still be alive in September. In other words, plan for widespread, annoyingly high failure rates. Clearly there are still excellent opportunities for improvement in this industry, in case you’re interested.

As for the acorn crop itself, it was mixed. Valley oaks started out surprisingly good around the new lab, but then went downhill quickly as we went to the higher areas in and around the serpentine outcrop. Overall, the crop was a bit worse than last year for both valley and blue oaks but considerably better than last year for coast live oaks, which had the best year since 2005 with a mean of 24.2 acorns counted per tree (in 30 seconds, divided between two of us, which is as long as we can count at one time without going nuts, as it were).

Then it was off to Hastings, where Jean and I did the tanoaks at Chews Ridge on Thursday and started the Hastings count Friday in anticipation of Bill's arrival.



*The traditional Hastings survey dinner with (from the right) Jean, Kyle (hiding partly behind Jean), Bill, Bill's daughter Natalie, and Bill's SO Karen Nardi, the official mojito taster and legal counsel for the California Acorn Survey.*

Hastings, unfortunately, is where things started getting weird. I'd kind of expected it to be a marginal year for valley and blue oaks, based on it being cold last spring and the trees not having flowered particularly synchronously, at least based on a first pass through Kyle's spring data. However, it turns out to be a pretty good year for all three of the main species, so much so that as of this writing we (that would actually be our fall acorn woodpecker crew) have found two fall nests, an event that only occurs in particularly good acorn years.

Not to get ahead of myself, but the really strange part is how much better the crop is at Hastings than at Jasper Ridge, where the crop is fair at best, and especially compared to trees further south, where we counted no (!) acorns on either the valley or blue oaks at Pozo, while the crop at Sedgwick is similarly fair to poor. In summary: I expected it to be a bad crop at Hastings. It isn't, but it's bad or worse both north and south in the Coast Range. Go figure. Someone really needs to study all this someday. Oh wait...that would be me....

And that was only the beginning. The valley oaks at Liebre Mountain in Los Angeles County did great—73.1 acorns/tree—almost as good as it gets. Elsewhere valley oaks range from terrible (Kaweah Oaks in Visalia), to average (Sierra Foothills in Yuba County and Hopland in Mendocino County), to well above average (Dye Creek in Tehama County and Whiskeytown in Shasta County). In other words, valley oaks this year are all over the board. So much for spatial synchrony. Maybe, as Jean suggested several times during the survey, it would have been a good idea to write that paper last year after all.

Getting back on track and ignoring the data for the moment, the statewide survey itself was, as usual, an adventure. A few of the highlights included:

1) Bucking the trend of the last several years, we went around the state counterclockwise in order to meet up with Victoria Sork and her group at Sedgwick on Monday, Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>. In contrast to us, Victoria, who's been studying oaks her whole distinguished career, actually knows something about oak flowering and pollen, which is to say that we probably would have benefitted talking to her a lot earlier than we did.

2) For the first time in recent memory we failed to make a stop at *Chez Brad et Louise* in Davis. Their house, gloriously remodeled with a new refrigerator and kitchen counter after decades of planning, is currently being rented by the church across the street for the benefit of a small cadre of homeless guys now camped out in their front yard. (Don't worry, Brad—they promised to fix the hole in the roof before the winter rains come.) Meanwhile, Brad is spending his sabbatical on the East Coast trying to relive the childhood years he spent wishing he were in California.

3) Switzer's, in the San Gabriel Mountains, where we count canyon and coast live oaks, was unreachable due to the Station Fire still burning at the time in the Los Angeles National Forest. I will spare you the details of how many people passed the buck to someone else when I tried to obtain permission to drive up there; suffice it to say that gaining access to such places is not straightforward. The good news is that due to poor timing we have two sets of counts from Switzer's last year; that will work, won't it?

4) It was great to see headlines in the newspapers like "ACORN Investigation Opened"; it's certainly time Congress got busy trying to understand more about our country's acorns. Keep up the good work!

5) We awarded ourselves the first-ever *California Acorn Survey* sightseeing interlude on Sept. 20<sup>th</sup> when we went to the pygmy forest on the Mendocino Coast. I must say, having all our oaks only 6' tall would make acorn counting a lot easier.

## THE ANNUAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

After dropping Dale back at the airport we immediately engaged with one of the primary missions of the *California Acorn Survey*, namely to eat at as many taco stands as possible. This is a goal that is becoming easier every year as California turns more and more into

### *Taco World*

In keeping with California's continuing demise and imminent takeover by Mexico we ate at a record six taquerias starting with **Bravo! Taqueria** (rating: 3 tacos) in Redwood City where Bill Carmen suggested we meet after our harmonic convergence at SFO on 9 September. Despite the unpromising mantra ("Healthy yet Tasty!") printed on their business cards (the existence of which was itself somewhat suspicious), the place was pretty good—ranking near the top of all the Mexican places we

managed to check out this year. Actually, the food was closer to the being in the middle, but the garden dining area in back was particularly nice and the excellent choice of beverages—I'm mainly talking cans of Dr. Pepper—prompt me to raise its rating considerably. It was certainly a fine way to start off the taco eating season and left us all in fine form to count the first acorns that afternoon at Jasper Ridge.



*Bill, the official Grand Mojito of the California Acorn Survey, shows off his fish tacos at Bravo! Taqueria on Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> in Redwood City before the start of festivities at Jasper Ridge.*

Next on our Taco Tour was the **Plaza Bakery and Café** (rating: 2.5 tacos) in Greenfield, where Jean and I stopped for lunch on Sunday, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>, on our way to Pozo during the first day of the statewide survey. The Plaza is our friend Ben's favorite place in Greenfield and I've frequented it numerous times in the past, mostly to stock up on Mexican pastries during early morning rock runs and birding trips. This time, however, we tried real food, which was mixed: Jean's tacos were very good (so much so that he ordered two more to go on our way out the door), but my burrito was, well, beany. All in all, I have to rate this place a bit better on the bakery than the café side; however, the tacos, which are a bit more expensive than other comparable places but include a nice slice of avocado, are very good and I highly recommend the tamales I've had here on previous occasions.

After the Plaza, we inexplicably failed to eat Mexican food for three days until we were heading towards Visalia on Wednesday after counting at Liebre Mountain. The normal route skirts Bakersfield and then shoots up Hwy 99 to the west end of Visalia, but one can also drive north on Hwy 65 through Porterville, which for some reason I had the vision of being a quaint, upscale, foothill town with interesting antique stores, charming boutiques, a smoke shop with rare Dutch cigars for Jean, and an innovative collection of Asian fusion restaurants.

As it happens, this is definitely not the case. Instead, Porterville is a monumentally ugly Central Valley city with one main strip mall filled with agricultural supply stores, boarded up businesses of questionable character only open on the third Mondays of even-numbered months, and (as far as we could tell) two restaurants. We started to head for the first, an "Italian Bar and Grill", but got cold feet when we appeared to be not only the only people there, but possibly the first customers to wander by in several weeks. We then quickly moved down the block to **La Fuente** (rating: 1 taco), a Mexican restaurant of the sort that we used to go to as kids; in other words, a place

with the ambiance and food one fully expected back in the days when America's primary source of information on Mexican cuisine came from comic books. Viewed from this perspective, the chile relleno I had was not bad—after all, how bad can a chile stuffed with cheese be when it's completely smothered in sour cream? Jean's shrimp looked pretty good as well, and they even threw in a free small cup of bean soup as an appetizer. In fact, it would have been OK if only Jean hadn't ordered those oysters. What was he thinking? Raw oysters? In the Central Valley? At a mediocre Mexican restaurant? Not a good idea. Unsurprisingly, they were everything we should have expected and less. At least they didn't make us sick, but then again, I think they had been sitting around so long that they had fossilized by the time we got them.

Fortunately, things picked up the next day after counting at Three Rivers when we went through the Central Valley town of Goshen, home to **Lydia's Mexican Restaurant** (rating: 4 tacos). Lydia's was nondescript but worth the stop, offering excellent sopes and real Mexican cokes with sugar instead of corn syrup. Indeed, our heads were filled with dancing enchiladas for miles afterwards, helping to erase all memory of the oyster tragedy we'd suffered the night before back in Porterville.



*Jean and the Green Giant at Lydia's on north of Visalia. Did I say nondescript? Invisible is perhaps more like it. Leave it to a good Mexican joint to attract*

*people solely on the basis of the odors coming out of the kitchen.*

Entering northern California, our next Mexican food adventure was in the unlikely town of Lucerne, "the Switzerland of California," on the north side of Clear Lake. Switzerland is, as far as I know, not famous for its Mexican food, a tradition that is being carried on in Lucerne. However, it was once again lunchtime, and we found ourselves at **Kapitan's Table** (rating: 2.5 tacos) serving Mexican and American food—not, in general, a good combination—but there weren't a lot of other choices and Jean was getting more than normally grumpy, so we stopped. And it turned out to be reasonable, despite the fact that when I ordered an asada taco, the guy asked whether I wanted 'steak' or 'ground beef'. Ah...I'll take the carnitas instead.... Meanwhile, Jean gorged himself on a plateful of taquitos, giving me a chance to scrutinize the décor, which included a fine set of red sombreros, a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge, several closeup shots of random roses, and a nice poster for the 1976 movie "Zacazonapan" starring Lucy Tovar. In other words, just the kind of art one expects to find in a typical Mexican eatery overlooking the Jungfrau.

Our final Mexican food for the trip came on the last day as we were leaving Hopland to turn south on Hwy 101. Hopland, it has to be said, is a fairly cute town with a brewpub, large alternative energy supplier (Real Goods Solar Living Institute), a couple of antique stores (usually closed), wineries up the wazoo, a large and prospering Indian gaming industry, and (inexplicably) no decent restaurants, at least that we've ever found, and we've tried pretty much all of them over the years. Fortunately, Jean noticed a taco truck on the side of the road just as we were heading out of town that resulted in us having lunch at **Taqueria Jalos** (rating: 4 tacos, with extra salsa), where I must say, the tacos were fabulous: as good, and possibly better, than any taco I've ever had in Seaside, Salinas, or even Switzerland. They were in fact so good that we were finally able to completely forget whatever those things were that Jean ordered in Porterville. Definitely a highlight of the trip, and an excellent way to end the Mexican food phase of this year's *California Acorn Report*.

### *Pozo Saloon, Pozo*

After our stop in Greenfield for lunch, we went on down to Pozo only to discover an almost complete absence of acorns. What to do? The obvious answer was to get a drink at the **Pozo Saloon**. Although only open on weekends, it's embarrassing not to have stopped here during any of our prior 21 trips to Pozo since 1989 given that it's exactly the kind of place where we like to spend our hard-earned acorns. Indeed, the Pozo Saloon gives every indication of being a veteran of having helped multiple generations of cowboys get drunk and pick up girls, if there ever were any in the Pozo area, which we highly doubt, other than the nice lady behind the bar and at least one other standing around out back. However, the big surprise was that the Pozo Saloon, far from being content to degenerate into a charming state of disrepair, is a happening place, as indicated by the sea of porta-potties lined up behind the buildings. Upon inquiry we discovered that the saloon's backyard is home to a concert series featuring the likes of Ziggy Marley, New Riders of the Purple Sage, Jefferson Starship, and a host of other performers who apparently attract thousands of people to this remote locale where they dance and unwind after a hard day of acorn counting. Never has there been a more vivid illustration of Wayne Campbell's mantra "book them and they will come." The big question now is: do you think Grace Slick might be interested in helping out with the survey after next year's show? **Rating: 3 beers.**



*The 2009  
Acorn  
Counters  
Anonymous  
Convention  
at the Pozo  
Saloon.*

### *Rusticana Trattoria Bar & Grill, Lake Elsinore*

When it comes to odd places we typically drive by without thinking twice, Lake Elsinore in Riverside County is near the top of the list. One reason we generally ignore it is because we're usually speeding by at 70 mph on Interstate 15 on our way to the Santa Rosa Plateau, during which we only achieve the most meager glimpse of the lake. This year, however, in order to avoid the traffic of eastern Los Angeles, we drove down Interstate 5 to San Juan Capistrano and then took Hwy 74 through Cleveland National Forest, which culminates in a fabulous view of Lake Elsinore before descending into the San Jacinto watershed below.

Lake Elsinore turns out to be a rare California bird: a fairly large body of water that's not man-made. More or less, at least. It turns out it dried up a couple of times, most recently in the 1950s and early 1960s, and then promptly flooded following a series of storms in late February 1980. Needless to say, such bipolarity didn't do much for the local tourist trade, so Lake Elsinore enthusiasts lobbied for a multimillion dollar scheme to stabilize the level of the lake, a project that has been only partly successful since no one seems to have considered the desirability of having an outlet for the overflow.

Be that as it may, it makes for some nice views coming down the mountain. As for places to stay, we once again went for the expensively named but otherwise unfailingly cheap and funky Lake Elsinore Hot Springs Resort, even though we again failed to take advantage of the mineral pool itself. Instead, we went into town and after looking around ended up at **Rusticana Trattoria Bar & Grill**.

Like the resort, Rusticana is expensively named but unfailingly funky. There were only two other guys in the place when we got there, both at the bar in sweatshirts emblazoned with the logo of a local drilling company. Meanwhile, the two people running the place included the chef in a camo hat and blue shirt and the waiter/busboy/sous chef/manager/wine steward wearing an A & F New York Athletics t-shirt who answered most inquiries with an enthusiastic "you got it!" Perhaps most intriguing was the flat-screen TV above the bar that was tuned to the cooking channel, where they were busy making various Italian dishes. So *that's* how they choose the daily specials....

In the end, though, the food wasn't bad. Actually, the food itself was marginal, but the bread they gave us for starters made up for a lot and the salads we had were fine. Otherwise, I'm afraid my *fettuccine alla caterina* was on the heavy side and Jean's shrimp-stuffed chicken wrapped in bacon with fried polenta was on the tough, overcooked, and greasy side. We did enjoy the Italian pop muzak, but all in all, I think we might have done better to do take-out and go soak in the mineral baths back at the motel instead. **Rating: 2 acorns.**

## PUBLISH OR PERISH DEPARTMENT

I was hoping to claim that the P or P department had managed to focus on publishing for a change, but we're apparently way too old not to have someone who has contributed importantly to the *California Acorn Survey* perish during the year. This year I'm sorry to report that it was John Harstaad, who hosted us for many years at Cedar Creek. John was an accomplished naturalist who was eager to share his vast knowledge of the natural history of the Cedar Creek area and we'll miss his low-key, non-Rolux presence.

On the tree side of things, we lost 7 this year, including a *kelloggii* up on the Arnold that is still standing but has clearly given up the ghost, an *agrifolia* at Santa Rosa Plateau that exploded, two *chrysolepis* at Palomar Mountain State Park that joined the others killed by the Poomacha Fire that burned the area in October 2007, a *kelloggii* at Liebre Mountain that's been threatening suicide for some time, and two *lobata* at Kaweah Oaks that are still alive but whose identity we've been unsure of for years and finally agreed to abandon and replace with trees we're sure we can find when we go back next year.



Jean, a Bishop in the Universal Church of Carbon Sequestration, performing last rites on tree 5 at Santa Rosa Plateau on Sept. 15<sup>th</sup>. It's not always clear why or how some of these trees die; this one, however, was clearly unable to handle the trauma of being abducted by alien tree farmers from the Gamma Quadrant. Darn you, aliens! Leave our trees alone!

As for the brighter side of the P or P department, I'm delighted to report that the *California Acorn Survey* at long last has put together its own website: [www.CaliforniaAcornSurvey.org](http://www.CaliforniaAcornSurvey.org), which, through the magic of the internet, automatically sends you to the site of a Nigerian scammer who specializes in collecting bank account data from computers connected to his server, usually after people are tricked into going there by the promise of having free fresh sushi delivered directly to their email accounts. Actually, it redirects you to [www.nbb.cornell.edu/wkoenig/wicker/CalAcornSurvey.html](http://www.nbb.cornell.edu/wkoenig/wicker/CalAcornSurvey.html), which currently doesn't offer much of anything other than to introduce the *California Acorn Survey*, provide a map of our study sites, and list recent references along with

pdfs. It also offers a way to download another copy of the *California Acorn Report* after you throw it away in disgust and provides a link where those of you who have no idea how lucky you have been all these years not being on the mailing list can access and download prior editions. The plan is to eventually provide more on this site, presumably after I retire and have time to figure out how to incorporate subliminal messages into the page exhorting people to send their bank account information directly to my Cornell email address rather than have to gather them indirectly via my Nigerian colleague.

Second, in keeping with our putative academic mission, we condescended to publish several papers of a scientific persuasion this year. First was a paper that looked in detail at what trees acorn woodpeckers harvest acorns from. (Acorn woodpeckers are, in case you don't know, those clown-faced nabobs of nuttiness that, as I've said for many years, someone *really* needs to study someday. Oh wait...that would be me again....) Our data, taken over several years by watching birds harvesting the acorns, was compared to data acquired indirectly by Victoria Sork and her colleagues at Sedgwick where they determined maternity of acorns collected from granaries. Both methods confirm that birds don't usually go very far to get acorns. In addition, we were able to show that birds harvested from a greater diversity of trees over a larger area in 2005, when the acorn crop was relatively poor, than in years when the crop was good.

Two other papers focused on that burning issue of modern evolutionary ecology: yes, I'm talking about nothing less than acorn size. The first, a true product of the *California Acorn Survey*, looked at variation in valley oak acorns, demonstrating that, contrary to intuition, individual trees produce larger acorns when they have larger crops. This lack of a trade-off goes along with earlier work we did demonstrating that there's no trade-off within trees between the size of the acorn crop and radial growth. In other words, when you're hot, you're hot. The best thing about this paper was succeeding in getting it into *Am. Nat.* after it was rejected by *Ecology*. It's always gratifying when the generally pathetically fruitless strategy of submitting up pays off.

Jean with a handfull of the mini bur oaks acorns at Cedar Creek in Minnesota. This unexpected pattern of miniaturization is also found in a series of other ecological phenomena as well, most notably that of donuts, which have evolved from clunky, hand-sized ancestors into the delicate, bite-sized nuggets found in the Minnesota region. Scientists are trying to discern the causes of this trend as we eat. I mean speak.



The second paper, stemming from a comment Jean made a few years ago that for some reason I felt obliged to follow up on, investigated geographic variation in bur oak acorn size. Bur oaks are a largely Midwestern species found from southern Ontario and Manitoba to Texas. Over this range the species exhibits a strong inverse latitudinal gradient in acorn size: acorns get smaller as you go north—a pattern shown by most, if not all, species of eastern oaks. The goal was to figure out why, the two main hypotheses being that it's basically a byproduct of environmental constraints—that is, acorns are smaller further north because it's colder and the growing season is shorter—and, more interestingly, that it's because of differential dispersal during the species' postglacial Holocene expansion by blue jays, which turn out to prefer smaller acorns and thus as the major disperser of acorns might have been the driver of them becoming smaller as the trees moved father and farther north after the last ice age.

And the answer is... (drumroll; confusion as I try to open the envelope): environmental constraints! Acorn size, determined from a series of sites from which acorns were collected by stalwart Citizen Scientists (recruited with the help of Janis and Project Feederwatch, one of her programs at the Lab of Ornithology), is directly correlated with environmental conditions and doesn't conform to the pattern one would expect if it were driven by jay dispersal. The really odd thing, however, is that the species that successfully colonized those more northern areas after the last ice age turn out to be the ones with larger acorns to begin with, a patterns that would seem to be completely contrary to the inverse latitudinal gradient they all tend to exhibit. That's the question I'd really like to figure out next, along with why there are 1-year and 2-year species of oaks in the world.

In any case, if you wish to know more about these pressing issues, go to the *California Acorn Survey* web site, where, after working your way past the Nigerian web page that will download all the bank account information stored on your computer, you will find references and even be able to get pdfs of the above papers.



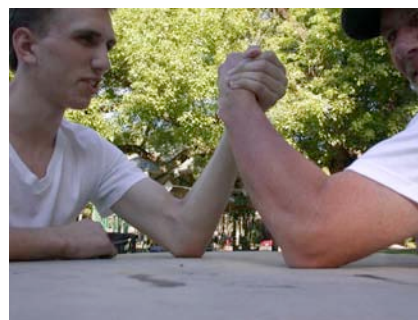
*Although I failed to include a picture of Eric, my indispensable postdoc who is not only running the woodpecker project but in charge of the winter acorn survey (yes—counting acorns is now a year-round occupation), here's a picture of his wonderful SO Julie Jo with a plate of the fabulous apricot-acorn cookies she made for several Hastings get-togethers this spring. And you though we just counted them!*

## END GAME

Alas! It all came to an end on Sept. 21<sup>st</sup> when I left Jean in Mill Valley with the Carmens while I returned to Hastings

to try and organize the data and get ready to return to New York. Before that, however, I managed to get in dinner at the Cachagua Store and breakfast with our good friends Ben and Cate, not to mention an invigorating ambush at a roost hole 60' up at Gate and a couple of hours with Dale in Davis before hopping on the train to San Francisco and catching the red-eye back to Ithaca.

*I can't for the life of me understand why I ended up with a photo of Ben rather than Cate, but here he is complete with his 70s hairdo—apparently a protest against ABC's untimely cancelling of the Brady Bunch Variety hour back in 1977.*



*I only had a couple of hours in Davis, but it was enough to give Dale and me the chance to conduct the ceremonial father/son arm wrestling match. Much to my surprise, I still won,*

*albeit barely, and only because Dale, now a junior majoring in physics, spent a good deal of the summer in Japan working on his karaoke skills instead of weight lifting.*

## FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

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**Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road  
Ithaca, NY 14850 (607-254-2151)**

**wdk4@cornell.edu**

and

**School of Biol. Sciences, Univ. of Nebraska, 348 Manter  
Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0118 (402-472-6449)**

**jknops2@unl.edu**

*The California Acorn Survey<sup>®</sup>, founded in 1980, is made up of a vast, nationwide network of, oh, a half-dozen or so people dedicated to understanding patterns of acorn production by California oaks. Members and years of servitude include*

Ron Mumme, Meadville, PA (1980-83, ex-officio 2009)  
Mark Stanback, Davidson, NC (1989-90, 1992)  
Elizabeth Ross-Hooge, Mt. McKinley, AK (1991)  
Jay McEntee, Berkeley, CA (2005)  
Eric Walters, Jamesburg, CA (2006-2009)  
Bill Carmen, Mill Valley, CA (1981-88, 90-92, 94-98, 2000-09)  
Jean Knops, Lincoln, NE (1993-2009)  
Walt Koenig, Ithaca, NY/Jamesburg, CA (1980, 1984-2009)