

# the green life

What is it like to step out of society and live a simpler existence? Wanting to dig a little deeper, **Rebecca Day** questions a couple of eco-pioneers currently living off-grid.

**name:** Nigel Clarke

**location:** Sussex, UK

**Time spent off-grid:** 40 nights so far

**blog:** [www.aforestfamily.wordpress.com](http://www.aforestfamily.wordpress.com)

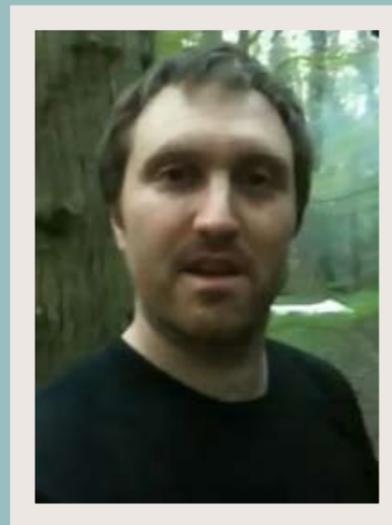
From down-town dwellers to off-grid enthusiasts, Nigel Clarke and his family have opted for a summer with an ethical difference - a summer that Nigel describes as "living with trees, fires and skies as forest stewards." Whilst their 'off-grid' experience is only temporary, it will most certainly give Nigel and his family a summer to remember, as well as act as a warmhearted offering to the environment.

## What influenced you to take the plunge into off-grid living?

After 2011, and feeling so sad each time we packed up after camping at festivals. Therefore we chose a six-month experience/experiment to give the kids a summer to remember (and us!); learn some practical lessons (fire cooking, forestry work, constrained water supply, eco-refrigeration and lifestyle changes); learn some lessons about ourselves (connectedness with nature, test some parts of our dreams for the future); and be free of bricks and mortar, double glazing, and house cleaning dreariness.

## What are the pros and cons of a self-sufficient lifestyle?

We're not actually aiming to be self-sufficient - we still have to bring in water from a nearby farm and charge our mobiles (iPhones!) in the car or at the farm. The cons are the



neighbours and planning; mice and food storage/smell of mice wee (as I write!); tent seal from weather; our site choice and the impact of the heavy rains throughout May.

## How did you find adapting to living 'off-grid'?

Very tough especially starting in May. We expected rough weather, but this year seemed particularly bad! The shift and adaption itself hasn't been too bad though, as we were keen and thought about it for over six months.

## How do you go about producing food and drinkable water?

Our aims for the future are to produce livestock and more veg/ growing. We also aim to live near a natural spring for water and use Eco filtering techniques.

## Which sustainable technologies do you use to generate heat, power and electricity within your home?

Wood burner for heating and outdoors open fire for cooking (through forestry management). We intend to bring in a solar panel kit for charging phones, but find that there isn't much need for electricity anyway.

## What was your life like before you went 'off-grid'?

We lived in a four bed semi in a town. There was too much cleaning and tidying - it was way too big a house - and paying ridiculous rent to the letting agents.

## How have family and friends responded to your decision?

Amusement and disbelief, mainly until they come and visit the woods - now even my mum has said she might be willing to stay over. She's no camper!

## Is there anything you miss about your lifestyle before?

Nope. Running hot water perhaps, but you can plan around it and even hook up off grid systems.

## Is there anything further you'd like to share with our readers?

I'd like to give my great thanks to the many supportive friends, especially those at High Weald Dairy and Ecocamp UK.

**name:** Em Magenta

**location:** Leckmelm Wood, Scotland

**Time spent off-grid:** 1983-1985 then 1995-present (apart from a few months)

**web:** [www.lightride.net](http://www.lightride.net)

Whilst sitting in the sun, on her beautiful cabin balcony with her solar-powered laptop, Em Magenta reveals her experiences with living 'off-grid', and how taking the plunge into a self-sufficient lifestyle has really changed her and her family's lives for the better. Her 'light-footed' method of living is an example to us all - by minimising our usage of non-renewable resources, we really can start making those little steps towards a more sustainable lifestyle.

## What influenced you to take the plunge into off-grid living?

I have always been happier living simply. When I was 14 or so, my own space was an old Showman's caravan. For me it's also about being more responsible for the effects of our energy consumption, and having more control of the costs. I can afford to be off-grid - I reckon I'd be struggling if I had to pay bills. I find the buzz, hum and electrical vibration of a mains (240V) house disturbing. You're surrounded by a web of electricity pulsing at some frequency quite different to human bodies, or the earth's. It gives me headaches!

## What are the pros and cons of a self-sufficient lifestyle?

For me there's just pros: a sense of responsibility, affordability, adaptability (I have taken my energy system with me wherever I've been called to work). If it breaks I (generally) know how to fix it (or can learn). I was given a gift voucher once for a well-known electrical store. I walked into the shop, looked around and was happy to realise there was virtually nothing I needed or wanted (but if they'd sold 12V kit I'd have been happier). The voucher went towards this laptop.

## How did you find adapting to living 'off-grid'?

Stimulating. Although at one point with three young children, I sometimes cried when I couldn't get the diesel generator to start running the twin tub. I found solace in trampling clothes in the bath. I enjoy finding alternatives to mainstream (usually highly energy consuming) methods and practices - it's easy now with the internet.

## How do you go about producing food and drinkable water?

Here, water comes by pipe straight from the burn (a small stream) into a 200 litre tank which holds it briefly. It's live, fresh and clean - full of vitality! The forest garden yields more and more as fruit trees and bushes mature, vegetables and herbs multiply and the previously poor soil builds up health. The polytunnel gives a green bite all year and I'm about to try making Kimchi (a traditional Korean dish) with some surplus miner's lettuce. We buy from a wholefood cooperative and still reluctantly use the supermarket.

## Which sustainable technologies do you use to generate heat, power and electricity within your home?

Five PV (solar electricity) panels - two at 60W, two at 85W and one 12W - feed two 110 amp hour deep cycle batteries. More batteries will be connected before winter. We have LED lights



that we made at a workshop with LEDfantastic, wind up lights and LED lights that use batteries we recharge with a solar battery charger. The rechargeable batteries run torches, a CD walkman with speakers and one or two of Storm's (my 11-year-old boy) 'essential' gizmo's - a cool space ship that I like. We also have a ghetto blaster adapted to run direct on 12V, 1500W inverter to run a laptop - I am looking into 12V charging - and rechargeable drill, angle-grinder and hub for the internet. Currently investigating micro-hydro and have a 400W air wind turbine, but probably won't use it again here as the trees have grown so tall.

## What was your life like before you went 'off-grid'?

I have been mostly off-grid since I was 20, but at times I've been acutely aware how being on mains encourages a tendency towards more stuff that's not so good for your health - more work, more consumption, more gadgets...

## How have family and friends responded to your decision?

They're really encouraging and some are genuinely inspired, though my grown-up kids like their mains for now. They too live in the forest, but at the 'other end'.

## Is there anything you miss about your lifestyle before?

Day to day I miss nothing, but get a real buzz out of, say having a hot deep bath at my mum's, or putting a load of washing in a machine. These rarer events become special.

## Is there anything further you'd like to share with our readers?

I've only recently come to realise that the way I've lived my life has given me skills I take for granted, but which more and more people are craving to learn. So I look forward to a future of sharing. We're currently developing a venue for training and camps to learn for this life. We're also WWOOF hosts and let out a yurt and caravan for visitors.

## off-grid: a helping hand

'Landbuddy' is a free online service that allows people to join up and meet with other like-minded off-gridders and pioneers. This is the brain child of Nick Rosen, founder of off-grid.net, an established author, campaigner and award-winning documentary-maker. His work purely stems around the importance of living a fulfilled and comfortable off-grid life. The site is ideal for those seeking an off-grid lifestyle, but are not entirely sure about how to go about taking the plunge. Budding off-gridders can seek help from those currently living off-grid and can find other self-sufficient eco-Samaritans in the local area. [www.off-grid.net/landbuddy](http://www.off-grid.net/landbuddy)

