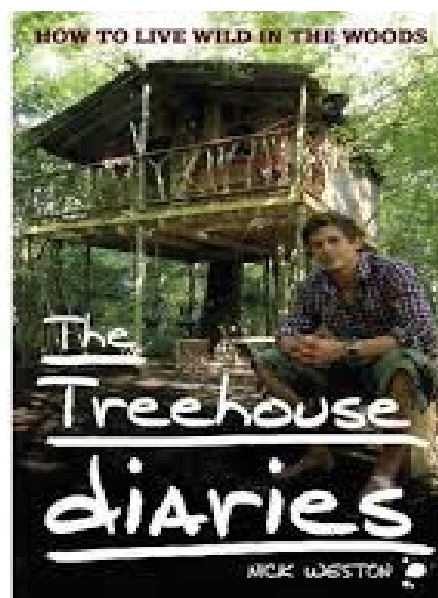


**Living the high life:
The diary of a
jobless and
disillusioned author
who decided to build
a tree house in the
woods and survive
off Mother Nature**



By [Nick Weston](#) ***The Tree House Diaries***

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1266236/Living-high-life-The-diary-jobless-disillusioned-author-decided-build-tree-house-woods-survive-Mother-Nature.html?ito=email_share_article-top

It's a dream many of us have cherished at one time or another - the primitive desire to escape to a simple, idealistic existence, living off the land - where Mother Nature, rather than Tesco, satisfies our stomachs.

Daydreams and adventure novels aside, most of us would never contemplate doing what author Nick Weston, a latter-day Robinson Crusoe, actually did - building and living in a treehouse in the woods of southern England, foraging for food, in a six-month experiment to see if it was possible to live as a 21st-century hunter-gatherer.

Nick, 28, who appeared in Channel 4's *Shipwrecked* and is a self-styled survivalist, found himself short of work, thanks to the credit crunch, but chose to turn the situation to his advantage by seeking to fulfil a boyhood dream of living self-sufficiently in a treehouse he'd built himself near Haywards Heath, West Sussex. Nick Weston building and living in a treehouse in the woods of southern England, foraging for food, in a six-month experiment to see if it was possible to live as a 21st-century hunter-gatherer.

'I was at a stage where I knew what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be - and that wasn't living in a rented flat in London with no money,' he says. 'I wanted to be in the countryside, and decided I would try living as self-sufficiently as I could for six months.'

'I'm not an eco-warrior, a hippy or a tree-hugger, but I knew I wanted to live a low-impact lifestyle that was sustainable and self-sufficient. And, like any boy who grew up in thrall to films like *The Swiss Family Robinson*, I had always wanted to live in a treehouse. So, with next-to-no money, this was what I chose to do.'

Nick duly trawled the internet, public library and local DIY stores for information about how to go about building his new life - and last April embarked on his challenge. First, he set some ground rules: this was not supposed to be an exercise in all-out survival, nor was it a trial period as a hermit. Life would go on as normal, except for his diet and living arrangements - because he wanted to enjoy the experience and not feel he had to struggle through a ridiculous challenge he had set himself.

So he allowed himself 'a few staples' to enhance the fresh produce he got from hunting or from the vegetable patch he cultivated next to his treehouse. These included olive oil, salt, pepper, flour, vinegar, tea, coffee, sugar, rice and yeast. This also included spending a couple of hundred pounds on wood and equipment to make his treehouse, which Nick vowed to build using recycled and natural materials as much as possible.

He charted his progress in a blog which averaged 2,000 hits a day - and it wasn't long before his adventure captured the attention of the media. A magazine column followed - and, much to Nick's bemusement, he was even besieged by TV crews for a week in July. Nick also kept a diary of the joys and hardships of tree-top living, which have now been published as a new book.

4TH APRIL

I need to find somewhere to build my tree house. I spoke to some family friends, who own a large farm, and offered to do some odd jobs in return for permission to build a treehouse in their woods. My new landlords seem intrigued by the idea - so now it's time to begin this whole crazy adventure.

10TH APRIL

I need a wood-burning stove but can't afford one. But I've found a way of making one using a steel drum (thanks to the internet). A local garage gives me an old one - and, with the help of a jigsaw, a drill, pliers, bolts, a hinge and a few L-brackets, I convert it into a stove I've named Bertha, after the extraordinarily capable factory machine in the 1970s TV show *Bertha* I watched as a kid.

22ND APRIL

I spend the next couple of days digging the ground of my new vegetable patch, making my own fencing and building wigwams for my runner beans. I'm impressed and amazed at what a couple of days' hard labour can achieve.

24TH APRIL

The £170 of wood I ordered to build my treehouse arrived today. The enormous pile

of planks is daunting - it's time to turn my kitchen table sketches into reality. I am pleased with my surroundings, but to be honest, I'm a touch anxious about living on my own in a wood. I'm wondering what will go bump in the night...

25TH APRIL

Today I start building the treehouse. In my excitement I wake at 6.30am under the tarpaulin sheeting I've erected to serve as base camp until the treehouse is ready. It's pouring with rain - great start! A couple of mates have come to help. We size up the tree I've chosen to build my house around and decide we need to cut down some trees to make support posts. None of us has ever felled a tree before - so shouting 'timber!' for real is exciting. We build a fire pit and tuck into some supper before getting into our sleeping bags for a well-earned rest. I'm lying on the hard ground, but I think a sore back is going to be the least of my worries..

4TH MAY

It's been a horrible weekend of saying goodbyes and clearing out the London flat I shared with my girlfriend, Clare. She knew how miserable I was, and has been very supportive about my project. She's moving in with friends - but leaving her behind is the biggest wrench of all.

5TH MAY

It's my first night living alone in the woods. It's midnight and I'm listening to the crackle of the fire and the faint screech of an owl.

Today has made me realise just how much work needs to go into the opening stages of a project like this. Spending the day gathering and cutting materials, working on the treehouse and then having to hunt and gather food to eat is proving a real nightmare. There just aren't enough hours in the day and I am finding it more exhausting than I'd anticipated. I manage to shoot a rabbit for dinner and eat it with some steamed nettles, but I hadn't realised how long the tree house would take to make. With a budget of only £ 30 0 for the building project, I'm cutting down the wood myself with a saw. The only power tool I have is a drill - so it's taking a long time. Now I'm worried about how I'm going to feed myself properly and build a tree house at the same time.



6TH MAY

I've decided I can't live in the wood full-time until the treehouse is finished, though it feels a cop-out. I need to concentrate on creating my crops and home, so decide to crash out several nights a week at my parents' home nearby. Over the next weeks I will be able to devote myself to making the flooring and building a shower from a bucket and a watering can. Later in the month I splash out £10 at a demolition yard

on a mahogany seat for the loo I'm building over a pit I've dug. I'm going to use sawdust and ash from Bertha as my home-made waste disposal system, but I reckon I need a decent loo seat - besides I also want to keep Clare happy on her weekend visits to the treehouse.

21ST MAY

I've noticed a white-necked cock pheasant hanging around. He's not scared of me and, as I don't need him for the pot just yet, I decide to call him Jeff and feed him any meagre scraps.

25TH MAY

It's pouring with rain, but at last I'm putting a roof on my house. It's not a one-man job, so my long-suffering friends, Tom and Chris, help me put up the corrugated iron and tarpaulin sheet. We finish - just in time to retreat from a deluge of Biblical proportions, which sets in for the night. I offer them a bottle of my home-brewed nettle beer (which tastes more like cider) and we eat dinner. As I listen to the rhythmic drumming of the rain, it feels more like being in a rainforest than the Sussex countryside.



1ST JUNE

I'm writing this by paraffin lamp, surrounded by moths. Dusk was announced by the 'tak-tak' of the blackbird and the wood settled into silence at about 9.30pm. Tonight, I enjoyed my first salad from the garden: lettuce, spinach topped with wild garlic, bitter cress and a handful of garden peas added to a bowl of rice cooked in stock. Looking out at a moonlit wood is a bit unnerving: the shadows form familiar shapes, but I keep waiting for movement. There is none - the wood is silent.

4TH JUNE

My house now has three walls. I decide to celebrate with a dip in the river. A couple of brown furry creatures jump in too - mink. They come quite close, but are more interested in play fighting with each other than me.

10TH JUNE

I'm back in London for work reasons - and it feels very strange. Even though I lived here for years and have only been away for a month, I am immediately struck by the pent-up anger of my fellow commuters. I feel uneasy, as if my security has been stripped away.

14TH JUNE

The fishing season starts at midnight, so out I go armed with nightlines. The next morning I find I've caught an eel, which I stun, behead, gut and put into my portable smoker.

22ND JUNE

I'm a real meat-lover and I find I get extremely anxious - almost panicky - by the evening if I have no protein for the table. Usually there are plenty of rabbits and, within 15 minutes, I've bagged a medium-sized coney, which I marinate with lemon juice, wild garlic, herbs and a dash of cider vinegar before pan-frying it on Bertha along with rice, steamed hop shoots and wilted spinach from the patch.

Agreeable as this lifestyle is, it's a lot of work for one person, although manageable. I miss surprisingly few 21st-century gadgets - though I do have my iPod with a solar-powered charger and a wind-up radio. I'm purposely avoiding the doom and gloom of the news and mostly listen to Radio 4 for company.

I've now made myself a comfortable bed and, thanks to my hard work, I am well-fed, so I am pretty content. I do miss running

water - fetching supplies from the nearby farm a couple of times a week is a chore. But most of all I miss Clare and the company of my friends, though many of them are coming down at weekends to escape the city now the weather is hot.

6TH AUGUST

I'd like to explore a bit further afield and hit upon the idea of making a trip along the river in a coracle I'm building myself.

I think there's a Huckleberry Finn deep in every boy who wants to explore a river and sleep rough - and this little excursion is my chance to do it. Navigating the jungle-like tangle of plants along the river makes my surroundings feel more like Siam than Sussex. It's a magical few days.

19TH AUGUST

Jeff the pheasant has not been around for a long time, but now I've discovered why. I came across his body in the woods - he'd not been dead long. I was sad as he'd become a bit of a companion, so I dug a hole and buried him. I'd always thought that if push came to shove he'd end up in the pot, but Mother Nature pulled the strings not

me.

19TH AUGUST

Today felt like the first proper day of autumn. I found a badger that had been run over by a car. While it's illegal to shoot one, I decided that this was my chance to try badger meat, so took it home to skin. I made badger burgers from the meat and I tried them out on plenty of people - the feedback was pretty positive.

6TH OCTOBER

The changing seasons are having a big impact on my life. The summer was a snippet of rural bliss that could have come straight out of an H.E. Bates novel, but with winter drawing in, the woods don't hold much appeal. And as my vegetable patch will only feed me until November and the wild larder only supplies 60 per cent of my food, staying here all winter is not going to be feasible. I feel I have made the most of my experience so far, but the idea was always to enjoy it. I am also craving company - I'm finding the solitary lifestyle harder to cope with than I'd thought. So it's time to plan to leave. **29TH OCTOBER**

Today is my last night alone in the treehouse, and as I wander out to hunt a rabbit for supper, I think about how much the seasons have changed and how my life has been intertwined with them. Looking back over my time in the woods, I realise I have discovered something new almost every day. I have become aware of the culinary versatility of our native flora and fauna - and now consider rabbits, pigeons, hop shoots and nettles as if they were everyday ingredients.

My bond with the countryside has also become stronger than ever, but, most of all, my time in the woods has given me confidence. Carving out an existence with your bare hands is a liberating feeling. I experienced great contentment looking after myself in this way. I now know that no matter how bad or desperate times become, I can always go back - to the woods, the fields and the places where wild things roam free - and not only survive, but thrive.



