

## TEXT 2

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Stefanie Marsh

# Wild at heart: how one woman and her husband live out in the woods

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Miriam Lancewood has been living off grid, in the wild, for seven years now and she can still pinpoint the exact moment she knew she had truly broken with social norms. “It was when the idea was born to wash my hair with urine,” she recalls.

5 She had just started living wild, in the New Zealand Alps, when she developed a persistent dandruff problem. Luckily, she remembered reading about an ancient remedy. “I sat in the sun for a horrible, stinky half-hour to let it soak in.”

10 I’d expected Miriam to look bedraggled<sup>1</sup>, maybe with a couple of teeth missing, but she’s immaculate and smiling broadly, her teeth shiny white (she usually cleans them with ash); no dandruff, legs shaven, she smells of campfire. She is powerfully built [...]. Her husband, Peter, proudly tells me she could beat most men in a fight: “Miriam is the hunter and I’m the cook. She’s much stronger than me. Women are better shots<sup>2</sup>,” he says. “And they’re more careful,” adds Miriam. “They are less driven by trophy hunting. They have less of a need to prove themselves.” [...]

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<sup>1</sup> snusket

<sup>2</sup> skytter

15 I've been invited for dinner and Peter is standing over a cast iron pot containing a bubbling bean  
stew. There are wrinkly plums to start. It's an exciting occasion for them: they haven't seen  
another human being for 11 days. It's 5pm. What have they been doing all day? "Nothing much.  
Waiting for you." In the first few months of their primitive life, Miriam thought she'd go mad  
with boredom but she soon fell in sync with nature. Half of any given day is spent collecting  
firewood. They sleep as long as it's dark. They've never had more energy.

20 It's a stark contrast to when Miriam was still working as a special  
needs<sup>3</sup> teacher in New Zealand. Those were grim days: "I was always  
stressed. And so bored. And depressed about thinking I'm going to do  
this forever and ever." She's learned so much since she's been out  
here but one question remains unanswered: "Where are all the  
25 women?"



When they do bump into another person in the wild it's usually a  
hunter, and always a man. She thinks that perhaps women have lost  
their connection with nature, "even more than men. And also," she  
adds, passionately, "why do women behave so weakly, physically? As in, 'I can't lift that,' 'I can't  
30 shit outside,' 'I can't have my period in the bush.'" She thinks it's a shame women are missing  
out. [...]

The seed of their idea was planted in India where they met 12 years ago; Peter, then 52, was a  
former sheep farmer, arborist<sup>4</sup> and university lecturer, and Miriam, then 22, wanted to see the  
world.

35 Together they travelled for a few years before moving to Peter's homeland, New Zealand. In  
2010, they sold or gave away most of their possessions and struck out<sup>5</sup> on their bold off-grid  
experiment, roaming<sup>6</sup> and camping in the vast, remote countryside. It was Miriam who carried  
the big hunting knife and knew how to use their Steyr Mannlicher .308 rifle. Without electricity,  
digital technology or a watch, the experiment was supposed to last a year. [...]

40 Their home is a khaki-green tubular three-person tent with two sleeping bags in it, sleeping pads  
and two rucksacks neatly packed with rudimentary<sup>7</sup> supplies. [...]

"It can be quite unpleasant, sometimes it's awful," Peter reminds me. Miriam's earliest awful  
experience was slaughtering her first animal: a possum<sup>8</sup>. "I was vegetarian since birth but  
getting weaker and weaker. We were waking up with pains in our stomachs from trying to keep  
45 warm." She set a trap but badly botched<sup>9</sup> killing the possum. While it was happening she felt

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<sup>3</sup> *special needs*: specialundervisning

<sup>4</sup> uddannet naturplejer

<sup>5</sup> *struck out*: begav sig ud

<sup>6</sup> vandrede omkring

<sup>7</sup> (her) mest basale

<sup>8</sup> pungrotte

<sup>9</sup> kludrede i

sick, and yet the fried possum tasted delicious: “Later, I felt very proud of myself.” She used her bow and arrow to hunt goats; the couple also ate dead deer left behind by hunters. [...]

If you’re going off grid, prepping<sup>10</sup> is key. Miriam and Peter spent months training for that first winter in South Marlborough, New Zealand: long, demanding treks, first-aid courses; reading survival and foraging books<sup>11</sup> – working out by the spoonful exactly how much flour, pulses<sup>12</sup>, tea bags they’d need. They practised seeing in the dark with night walks. Miriam isn’t a conspiracy theorist but she’s proud she has now learned survival skills, in case of Armageddon<sup>13</sup>. [...]

Miriam and Peter often use the word “trapped” to describe how other people live. They never intend to have children and rely on a modern innovation – Miriam’s IUD<sup>14</sup> – to make sure they don’t. They say it would be impossible to live in the wild with kids. So are kids a trap? “For us it would be a trap,” says Miriam. “You have to have a regular income. You have to settle down.” She laughs: “It scares me just thinking about it.” Miriam describes how men they do meet on their travels will often suddenly open up about their personal lives: “They say they wish their wives would come out hunting with them or if they had a choice again, they would never have children. That was the end of their freedom, they say.” [...]

Peter’s theory is, “Modern civilisation, the suburban life just doesn’t suit men’s nature. It leaves men feeling constantly unchallenged. I’d say a third of the population are seriously unhappy.” He finds it startling that, with the advances in birth control, the majority of women still choose to have children. “I’ve met so many interesting women in their 20s, then along comes 30 and they succumb<sup>15</sup> to the pressure. You think: ‘Why did you do nothing else with your life?’”

The real problem, thinks Peter, is that everyone’s too obsessed with security, to the point where it interferes with their ability to think logically, or find happiness: “People say to us we’re living their dream, and I say to them, ‘Do it.’ But they say, ‘Oh, I can’t,’ and I say, ‘What do you mean can’t? Of course you can.’ And they look a bit confused by that statement – because it’s true.” Maybe, I say, it’s because they’d prefer a more temporary break with society: once you’ve opted out of<sup>16</sup> your career, sold all your stuff – there’s no return.

“And that,” he says, with satisfaction, “is exactly the point.” Miriam nods in agreement. “Because once you’ve cut with your boring, unhappy life, I can guarantee that you’ll never want to go back.”

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<sup>10</sup> forberedelser

<sup>11</sup> *survival and foraging books*: bøger om at overleve og selv finde føde

<sup>12</sup> bælgfrugter

<sup>13</sup> verdens undergang

<sup>14</sup> spiral (prævention)

<sup>15</sup> bukker under

<sup>16</sup> *opted out of*: fravalgt