Writer Phillip Vannini on the bank of the Wheaton River.

Firewood stacked near the Wheaton River.
Imagine there was a blackout. Right now. What would you see in the dark?

It was 2003 when the last massive North American blackout occurred. Ontario and large parts of the northeast and midwest United States instantly plunged into darkness. Cash registers, gas-station pumps, traffic lights, computers, TVs, and all the supposedly essential technologies that make our daily lives better suddenly fell asleep.

Panic didn’t break out. Instead, a few inhibitions gradually melted away. Teenagers and business people rolled up their shirtsleeves and directed traffic on the streets. Workers left their offices and took their favourite books to the park. In the end, the blackout revealed how pervasively wired our bodies and minds really are, but also how ready we may be to adapt to an unplugged world.

Imagine you had the opportunity to disconnect from the flood of emails and calls or from the need to buy another expensive appliance. Would you choose to unplug?

It’s late September. Mornings are chilly in our cabin in the hamlet of Mount Lorne, south of Whitehorse, which makes me enjoy my sleep even more. I hear the heavy metal door of the woodstove being opened downstairs. I try to ignore it. I pretend to be asleep as kindling stacks up, piece after piece, with a gentle tick. The sound of another match strikes as Jon lights the propane stove to make tea. My guilt flicks on.

“I got it, man. I’ll go get water.”

The Wheaton River is 98 steps away from our cabin door. I counted them on my way to our sole source of water the first morning of our stay. The insecure part of me needed to know how far I had to sprint in case a bear came to visit.

I attempt to splash a few drops of liquid ice on my face, but the water is so cold on my hands—at least to me, a wimpy Gulf Islander from the B.C. coast—that I’m wide awake before it even reaches my cheeks. I lift my head to catch a peek of the mountain that the torrent descends from, but all my eyes register is the season’s first dusting of
snow atop the triangular slabs of dark rock hugging Annie Lake Road.

“Any luck with bears this morning?” Jon teases me as I return home with the fruits of my hard work.

“Any luck with stray bush Internet signals?” I rib him right back.

Give or take a few minor adjustments, neither he nor I would struggle to adapt to life off the grid. This is something we have come to realize methodically, indeed scientifically, over the last year. By vocation we may be able to live off the grid, but by training I am an academic and Jon is a photographer. Together we are ethnographers in search of a better way of life—or more precisely, in search of Canadians who seek a better way of life off the grid. We are documenting unplugged life in all ten provinces and three territories—two years of travel and hundreds of encounters with people who aren’t afraid of a blackout because they make their own power.

“If the power goes out,” as one of them told us, “I fix it.” Just like that.

“Off the grid” means off the electricity grid. But once you unplug from that big one, other grids cascade off your life in a domino effect. Soon enough you’re independent for your heat, cold and hot water, and waste disposal. You may even find yourself growing your own food, or perhaps hunting or fishing for some of it. You might keep your Internet and phone signal, but kill your TV—after all you’re busier (and happier and healthier) collecting and chopping wood, and sweeping snow off your solar panels.

“Living off the grid is a way of living more simply,” Brian Lendrum, a Yukon goat farmer, confides to us. “It’s also a way of challenging yourself, a way of going back to the basics without losing too much comfort.” Lendrum makes it work with simple resources. The sun shines on his large array of DC-electricity-generating photovoltaic panels. When clouds get in the way, a backup fuel generator supplies the rest. Plenty of lake water—sucked inside his home by an inexpensive pump—ensures he has enough for bathing and washing. Propane—every off-gridders’ favourite gas—powers a few appliances.

Indeed, living off-grid is not like being stuck in an endless blackout. Contrary to what you might think, those living off-grid have their houses fully lit, their food refrigerated, and their clothes kept clean by efficient washing machines, just like you and me. In fact, some of their homes are so intelligently designed that renewable sources of energy allow them to save money and reduce their carbon footprint. Other dwellings may be rougher around the edges, but they happen to be tucked away in spots so hauntingly stunning to make you want to survive without a toaster or a blow-dryer.

Some people even run businesses off-grid. At their Lake Laberge goat farm, Lendrum and his wife, Susan Ross, make delicious cheese and sell it at the Alpine Bakery, in downtown Whitehorse. Carmen Muehlemann and Robert Perren, our hosts at the Wheaton River Wilderness Retreat, fulfill the dream of escape for travellers unperturbed by the absence of air conditioning and a flush toilet.

Further west—smack in front of the impossibly beautiful peaks, forests, and waters of Kluane National Park—the Kathleen Lake Lodge and other off-grid lodges and cabins keep more visitors warm and enchanted with the raw energy of the Yukon. Other off-grid-home residents throughout the territory log-on to the Internet everyday and write, consult, design, or simply commute from their abodes to their hospital, school, and office workplaces.

So, why do people choose to live off the grid when our collective consciousness is so deeply wrapped in the logic of advanced technology-driven comfort, connectivity, and convenience? Well, maybe they don’t really choose at all—it just chooses them.

“There is something about living in the bush:” Barrett Horne muses from his home outside Whitehorse, “the self-sufficiency, the peace and quiet, the harmony with the place you live in.” He and his wife, Carol, always knew they wanted to be “in the bush.” When they came to visit their son, who had moved to the Yukon to be a guide, they fell in love with the place and began planning their quasi-retirement.
Brian Lendrum and his water pump on the shore of Lake Laberge.

“We had four mutually exclusive criteria,” he says. “We wanted inexpensive acreage, we wanted to be somewhat near to town and the airport, we wanted some kind of water frontage, and we wanted to be in the bush. I was feeling claustrophobic living in an 800-square-foot, semi-detached house in an old council neighbourhood in the U.K.” It turns out the only available place was so far from the nearest low-tension electricity pole that hooking up would have cost them a quarter of a million dollars. So off the grid it was. As it turns out, that’s how most off-grid life adventures begin.

“There is something very healing about this place,” Horne tells us. “We call it ‘Still Point.’” Wind regularly blows their self-assembled turbine, while sunrays caress shiny solar panels. Wood burns within the chambers of their wood-gasification boiler, the heat streaming up and down the conduits underneath their floors.

But there is no frenzy, no motion, no buzz from the electricity wires at Barrett’s Still Point or at the various still points of other off-grid homes. What is undeniably palpable—even for short-term visitors like us—is a vivid feeling of decompression, of symbolic and material remove from the hum of perfectly dispensable urban infrastructures and the whir of extravagantly unnecessary technologies that are larger than life and twice as complex.

It’s a simpler way of life—free from the pretense that plugging in is necessary to survive. It’s as if a blackout had let a star shine so bright to lead the Yukoners we met—like Brian, Susan, Barrett, and Carol—all the way north of 60. As if a natural light had beckoned them into the bush and asked them kindly not to outshine it with a light of their own. And they just listened, and every day they continue to tune in to the delightful harmony of their drone-free quiet.