

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Do you dream about doing something different with your life, but feel too afraid to go for it because resources and assistance aren't available? Sometimes, help is hiding in plain sight. It's particularly important to keep a good network alive when making a change that is still not quite mainstream (such as putting solar panels on your roof). If you've exhausted online searches or think you already know about all the resources available to you, try asking friends or businesses for referrals. You might be surprised to find a new organization, service, or product that makes your dream possible, whatever that dream may be.

Somehow, we've been living off-grid for half a year without discovering That Off Grid Guy until recently. Through a referral from Shine Solar, we met Kirk Wolf, the go-to guy. His mission is "to educate home and business owners on the financial and environmental benefits of solar energy and off-grid living. We provide our customers with long-term energy saving options that not only reduce costs but also promote sustainability by supporting our ecosystem." A free site assessment first checks to see whether your structure can support solar, and gathers initial data to design a comprehensive system. Kirk started his business in 2017, but was brought up with off-grid principles as a kid. So he's not just selling a product, but living a lifestyle that makes a difference.

His home was featured on the DIY Network and Discovery Channel for the episode "Building Off the Grid: Ozark Paradise." Kirk says he uses solar power and gets water from a natural spring on his property because he didn't want to be on the grid and paying utility bills. Self-sufficiency was important, too, although he also barter his services in exchange for products from neighboring farms. But contrary to what many believe, he has modern amenities like a water heater, central heating and air, a TV with stereo system, internet and more. "People say, Oh you're that off-grid guy, there's this idea that someone should be running around in animal hide being anti-government and pro-gun, but living off-grid to me doesn't mean I go live in a hole and wait for the end of the earth guarding my supplies. The only reason I choose to live off-grid is because I'm tired of paying bills."

He explained that his business emerged from his lifestyle and became primarily a consultation venture. "I started getting phone calls from people who knew I built my own cabin and asked me to build one for them," he said. This was appealing but would not be long-term sustainable for him because it would take too much energy to build an off-grid house for so many people. So he narrowed his focus down to off-grid solar installations and consulting. Sometimes he'll work with an established system and do an upgrade; other times, he does a completely new installation.

The smallest system is called the Pioneer Package, and includes one panel, battery, charge controller, inverter, wiring, and is completely turn-key – it's ready to use as an independent self-sufficient system. After it's installed, it becomes the owner's responsibility to monitor their system and be aware of what appliances can and can't be used at any given time depending on

their battery charge, the weather, and other factors. The package costs \$2,800 for everything, and future upgrades would only cost the expense of whatever additional batteries or panels were added. He recommends no more than 4 batteries for every panel, the max it can handle for daily living.

There is a clear difference between on-grid and off-grid solar. “99% of people who know the word solar don’t know the distinction,” Kirk explained. Grid-tied solar is still at the mercy of the utility grid – if the grid goes down, the solar panels are not going to give your house electricity. The panels generate electricity on the grid, reducing your electric bill. But a fully off-grid system needs no power lines. The solar panels are charging their batteries, and the batteries are what provides electricity to your home through an inverter.

When someone purchases solar panels (just like with energy star appliances) they can get a tax credit for it. The federal tax credit for solar provides a 30 percent return on the money spent, or for example \$300 back from \$1,000 spent. Keep your receipts and apply for this credit the next time you file taxes. Learn more at ThatOffGridGuy.com, on Facebook or call (479) 228-1843 for a free quote. And keep networking – even if a referral ends up not helping, it may be just what your neighbor needs!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist living in an off-grid tiny house on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer tips to those wanting to make a difference at www.RipplesBlog.org.