

Stand up for safety

TAKE TREE STANDS SERIOUSLY FROM THE START.

Natasha Kassulke

Hunting from heights provides great benefits including increasing your field of vision. But with those benefits, comes serious risks. In fact, one in every three hunters who hunts from a tree stand will fall at some point in their hunting career. Of those falls, 75 to 80 percent will occur while ascending or descending the tree.

An International Hunter Education Association (IHEA) study found that nationally 300 to 500 hunters are killed annually in tree stand accidents and another 6,000 will have tree stand-related injuries from not being harnessed properly including suspension trauma when the pressure of hanging motionless in leg straps can pool blood in the legs, limiting circulation, depriving organs of oxygen and leading to unconsciousness followed by death.

An article in the winter 2012 edition of the *Hunter & Shooting Sports Education Journal* explains that 80 percent of tree stand accident victims will require surgery, 60 percent will have fractures, 30 percent will have spinal fractures and 10 percent will have permanent disabilities or paralysis.

Last year, Wisconsin had two fatal tree stand falls, according to Jon King, DNR's hunter education administrator.

The good news, though, is that tree stand accidents are preventable.

"I see hunters spend a lot of money on a bow or gun, but then they don't want to spend money on tree stand safety gear," opines Bill Wright, a longtime Wisconsin hunter education instructor. "So, I ask them, 'What is your life worth to you?' And I tell them that tree stand safety is just as important as firearm safety."

Wright often hears from hunter education students who say they know someone who is paralyzed from a tree stand accident. Yet, these accidents don't garner much media attention since most states, including Wisconsin, don't track them as hunting accidents unless they involve a weapon discharge.

Tree stand safety has evolved as new research and statistics have become available. What were once considered "safe" tree stand safety practices 15 years ago are simply not considered safe today.

Wright was a member of the North Bristol Sportsmen's Club, which produced one of the first tree stand safety videos in the early 1990s. Today, tree stand safety factors prominently into his hunter education classes and he brings along



Learn more about the National Bowhunter Education Foundation's Project Stand to prevent tree stand falls at projectstand.net/.

a duffle bag to illustrate his point. As he unpacks the contents of his bag, he meticulously explains the role of the vest and each strap and carabiner. He recites every step in the process for properly hooking up the gear and the order in which that should occur. He demonstrates the climbing moves, both up and down the tree. He reminds hunters to inspect their own gear to make sure that it — like them — is in shape.

Supplies for safety

Wright wants hunters to invest in safety, meaning that they take the time to learn how to be safe and they purchase the gear necessary, including a full-body harness, also known as a fall-arrest system (FAS) that is manufactured by Treestand Manufacturers Association (TMA) standards.

“A harness will keep you in the stand if you slip or fall,” Wright explains. “But you have to wear the harness for it to work.”

According to TMA, 82 percent of hunters who fall from tree stands do so because they are not wearing full-body harnesses.

Never use single-strap belts or chest harnesses. Attach your FAS to the tree while at ground level and keep it attached throughout your hunt from the time you leave the ground and climb up until the time you get back down.

When climbing in and out of a tree stand, Wright recommends the following equipment:

- **Body safety vest** – This is an effective style of full-body harness and comes in different sizes, so find one that fits your body size and shape.
- **Lineman’s belt and/or climbing belt** – Use this when climbing up and down the tree.
- **Haul line** – Leave your gear on the ground, and once safely in your stand, use a haul line to raise it up to you. Make sure firearms are not loaded. If using a bow, put the arrows in a covered quiver that is secured to the bow. Never sling your firearm or bow when climbing.
- **Suspension relief strap** – It is best to attach it to your full-body harness from the time you leave the ground to the time you return to the ground. It provides a loop to stand in if you fall.
- **Tether strap** – Secure a short tether/safety strap between you and the tree when seated in the tree stand. A safety strap should be attached to the tree to prevent falling more than 12 inches.

- **Tree strap** – Use this to connect the tether strap.
- **Gun cover** – This keeps the gun clean and makes it easier to attach to a haul line. Make sure the gun is unloaded, the safety is on and the action open.

Stands

There are four basic tree stand types:

- **Lock-on or hang-on stands** – These provide about 4 square feet of space and must be hauled into place and secured to the tree with belts or chains. These require climbing aids such as ladders or climbing sticks.
- **Climbing stands** – These are self-climbing stands that allow the hunter to “walk” up the tree by moving the top section with the hands and the bottom section with the feet.
- **Ladder stands** – These provide a platform usually 10 to 20 feet above the ground. Hunters usually assemble them before the first day of hunting and it can take several people to erect.
- **Towers and tripods** – These do not require a tree. Wright cautions against using free standing towers and homemade stands. Commercially manufactured tripods can be used following manufacturer’s instructions.

Always inspect stands that are left up all year for dry rot and watch for



Bill Wright demonstrates tree stand safety techniques during his hunter safety class.

“A few bow seasons ago, a friend of mine was putting up his stand in his favorite tree,” recalls hunter education instructor Jim Charmoli. “He was screwing in the steps and was using the same holes as he used the year before. He said they felt sturdy and he continued upward. As he was preparing to attach the stand, a step pulled loose and he fell 20 plus feet, striking branches as he fell. He had a 4X4 but his hands would not work to operate the controls. Between episodes of passing out, he managed to walk the trail to the blacktop. He said there was a cabin by the trail and as luck would have it, the owner was there that weekend. He was treated by the medics and transported via helicopter to the hospital.

“He had numerous broken bones and has had several surgeries and a lot of physical therapy. He has lost some motion in his hands and has numerous screws and plates in his hands, wrists and back. Thankfully, he is able to function and is back bow hunting, although he uses a crossbow now. He said he knows how lucky he is to have survived.”



The tree stand that Kim Zuhlke fell from near Kendall, Wis.

“The year of my fall I had eight stands out,” recalls Kim Zuhlke, a bow and firearm hunter who grew up on a farm near Kendall where his fall occurred. “On two of the eight, I did not have climbing ropes because I viewed those stands as very safe. The stand from which I fell was a favorite and one I had climbed many times over the years. I had made a very sturdy and safe ladder out of treated lumber. The ascent took only one step, from ladder to a branch about 5 inches in diameter. I would clip in to my safety tether after my step from the branch into the stand. It was the last step before clipping in that I fell on as the branch had become wet and slippery on the arch of my rubber scent-control boots.”

KIM ZUHLKE

BRENDA VON RUEDEN

rust on the mechanisms that secure the stand to the tree. Check the straps — animals may have chewed on them. Pull on the stand and move it around and see how much it moves. Inspect the seat and foot stand and make sure the nuts and bolts are tight.

If you are letting a friend use your tree stand, make sure they know how to use it and that they are safe.

And never hurry. While climbing with a tree stand, make slow, even movements of no more than 10 to 12 inches at a time. Make sure you have proper contact with the tree and/or tree stand every time you move. On ladder-type stands, that means maintaining three points of contact with each step — either two hands and one foot or two feet and one hand at all times. Keep a firm hold on the climbing system as you enter or leave a platform and don't let go until you're sure that you are secure.

Pre-hunt preparations

Before the day of your hunt, consider the area that you will hunt and inspect the tree you plan to use. The tree should be healthy and strong. Never select a diseased or leaning tree. The tree should be substantial enough to support your weight and that of your stand. Never support your weight with a tree limb as it can break.

The day of the hunt, make sure to let someone else know where you are hunting (be specific), where you'll be parking and what time you intend to return. If possible, hunt with others. Carry a cell phone with you so that you can call for help if needed. Check the weather forecast and be prepared. Know that you are likely to be climbing into your stand when it is still dark or foggy. You may encounter slippery conditions such as snow or ice.

Fatigue is another consideration. "When you sit in the cold for hours," Wright says, "your muscles might not work the same as you would normally expect."

Hunting from a tree stand is not like riding a bike, Wright contends. Refresh yourself before you go out and practice the skills needed to maneuver in a tree stand before using it. 

Natasha Kassulke is editor-in-chief of Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine.

WATCH a tree stand safety video from the National Bowhunter Education Foundation online at treestandvideo.com.

TAKE the Treestand Manufacturers Association's (TMA) free tree stand safety course at huntercourse.com/treestandsafety/.

VISIT the TMA website at tmastands.com for a list of TMA-recommended gear and stands.

GO to dnr.wi.gov and search "tree stand safety" for more information.

THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Dr. Lee Faucher, a trauma surgeon at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics and professor in the Department of Surgery, has seen too many injuries from tree stand falls during his career. He knows the toll they take on affected families.



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"I was seeing young, 30-year-old guys, coming in paralyzed and their lives — their family's lives — had changed forever during what was supposed to be a recreational event," Faucher says.

He sees head injuries, broken ribs, broken legs and arms, broken backs, spinal cord injuries, broken pelvises — the same injuries he sees from those working in careers most prone to falls such as roofers.

That's why a couple of years ago, he approached the Department of Natural Resources with an idea to focus efforts to prevent tree stand falls — not just to tell people to be careful in tree stands, but to give them concrete steps they can take to prevent a fall. He likens the need for tree stand safety messages to other popular safety program messages such as promoting child safety seats and air bags in cars.

There is a nationwide trauma registry with nearly 10 million patients in it, including tree stand fall victims, but what it lacks is detailed information about what led to the trauma occurring.

Faucher seeks to fill in the gaps and is tracking tree stand fall victims who come to major trauma centers around the state. He is part of a team of trauma surgeons interviewing those who fall and asking about the conditions surrounding the accidents and what the hunters might do differently if given the chance. The team is using questions developed with the help of serious hunters so that they make sense to other hunters — questions about harnesses, tree stands and their conditions, weather conditions and time of day.

By learning what causes falls, Faucher hopes to come up with a plan to educate the public about how to prevent them. He expects his study to wrap up early next year.

Joining Faucher on the team is Becky Turpin, University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics adult injury prevention coordinator.

"At this point, when someone comes in after they have had a fall, we collect their medical data as we always did," Turpin says. "But we also perform an interview using the questions that Dr. Faucher mentioned so that we can learn what actually happened in their particular case."

Turpin says they have had 100 percent cooperation among fall victims in their interviews and the victim's identities are kept confidential. They see the most severely injured hunters. There are others who have a fall and are seen in an emergency department, treated and discharged and never admitted so are not captured in the study.

"No matter what, there is cost associated with these falls," Faucher says. "It might be an emotional toll or, in a tough economy, the cost of having to be off work for a few days — not getting paid even for a short time can be devastating to a family. And then you take it up a step to the people who will never be able to go back to work because of a head injury or paralysis. That exponentially compounds the problem when it was preventable."