



Charles Teets

AFTER THE FALL

By Charles Teets

November 8, 2004 was a beautiful day. The air was crisp and clean. I was surely blessed to have the freedom and opportunity to pursue white-tailed deer in the majestic mountains of West Virginia. Old bucks were on patrol in search of does. Finally, the rut had begun. That evening's hunt would become infamously special. It would also change the way in which I hunt and live for the remainder of my life.

By the time the evening shadows began their dance toward darkness, I was ascending the thick-barked chestnut oak toward my tree stand. As I climbed, I wondered which way the buck would pass on the old

road above my stand. Everything seemed perfect -- rubs and scrapes were scattered along the old road; even the wind was just right.

A few seconds later my visions of big bucks vanished as I lay flat on the forest floor below my stand. With my left boot twisted 90 degrees to one side and blood seeping through the side of my boot, I quickly realized this was more than a bad sprain. Within moments, the beautiful Lost River Valley was filled with the sounds of rescue sirens. There was no wondering about their destination, for this time the bells were tolling for me.

After a 10-minute airlift--a \$6,000 one to be exact--I arrived at

the medical center. After all the attention, I might have started to feel special. I shouldn't have, since at least two other hunters had preceded me to the trauma unit this very day. Both had been victims of falls.

Someone once said, "There are two types of tree stand hunters -- the ones who have fallen and the ones who will fall." While not exactly true, a Deer and Deer Hunting magazine survey revealed that about one out of every three (37%) tree stand hunters will experience some type of slip or fall while hunting. In fact, the practice of stand hunting is the most likely way a hunter will be injured while hunting.

The purpose of this article is not to scare anyone from stand hunting, but to raise the awareness of hunters about the danger involved in doing so. I sincerely hope that the information in this article will prevent a reader from falling and experiencing a serious injury.

Hunters use several types of stands. These include climbing stands, hang-on types, ladder stands, and permanent or built stands. While the ladder stand may be the safest of all, none are immune from danger. Past surveys have revealed that most accidents involving ladder and hang-on stands occur while stepping in or out of the stand. Accidents involving permanent stands can occur from poor design and maintenance. Climbing stand accidents have many different causes, including slipping on the tree and mechanical failure. However most are caused by improper use or just bad judgment on the part of the hunter.

It's evident that some hunters will do almost anything to get that special deer. They will spend excessive amounts of money trying to get that edge to assure their success. At the same time, many will overlook the danger involved in stand hunting and neglect their own safety.

Just remember that the most important thing to your family is not whether you get old “Mossy Horns” but, that you walk safely through the door at the end of the day.

Being Prepared

Let's look at some factors that may prevent a fall and decrease your chances of serious injury.

•Physical Condition. If you are not in good physical shape you should avoid hunting from stands, especially climbing stands. The DNR's West Virginia bowhunter survey shows that the average age of Mountaineer archery hunters continues to climb. In 2000 the average age was 42.8. By 2005 it had risen to 45. As we age, our strength and reflexes slowly deteriorate. Long gone are the days of jumping off buildings and out of hay barns! With that in mind, more and more hunters are opting to hunt from ground blinds. A well-placed ground blind can provide an option for hunters who are also prone to dozing off while they hunt. Too many hunters have found themselves on the ground or hanging from a safety harness after falling asleep while in their stand.

•Practice, Practice, Practice. Never use a stand that you are not familiar with. It's wise to practice using your stand in your back yard

prior to hunting season. If possible, make sure someone is available as a spotter.

•Tree Selection. Use only thick-barked trees when using a climbing stand. Avoid slick-barked trees like poplars and maples. Never use a telephone pole instead of a tree.

•Weather. Think twice before climbing into a stand that is wet or

coated with snow or ice.

•Maintenance. Be sure to check ALL equipment. Check all belts and straps for wear. Inspect welds, pins and bolts. Everything will weaken with age. Check all wooden stands for cracked or rotten boards.

•Safety Rope Systems. These new systems should be used while climbing into and out of your stand. Most hunters don't attach their safety harness until they are in their stands. This safety rope system keeps the hunter attached to the tree at all times. This is very important since most accidents occur while climbing in and out of the stand.

•Communication. If possible, and where service is available, take your cell phone with you. If hunting with someone, make sure to take along some type of two-way radio. In case of



Bowhunter Charles Yakubow practices using the rope climbing system, which allows the hunter to be attached to the tree at all times.

Charles Teets

It's senseless to save a few bucks on a safety system and take the chance of a life-changing accident or even death. Besides, the cost of an accident can be staggering.

an accident either of these devices could mean the difference between life and death. Also, make sure that someone knows exactly where you will be hunting. Be specific! Take the time to draw a map if you must. Just telling someone you will be hunting in the Monongahela National Forest will not suffice! Also let them know about what time you should be returning.

•Common Sense. Never climb into a stand with a loaded weapon. Make sure your weapon is unloaded before using a rope to pull it up to your stand. Never, ever try to adjust or level your stand while in a tree.

Climb down the tree and make all adjustments while on the ground.

•Safety Restraint System. The most important decision a tree stand hunter will make is to use or not

use a safety harness. However, the type and quality of the system is viewed as equally important. The DNR bowhunter survey shows that 80 percent of those hunters questioned use some type of safety restraint. That means one out of every five bowhunter opts not to use a safety system. This is alarming since almost all serious injuries occur to

(Continued to next page)



Charles Teets

A full body harness, shown here by Yakubow, is the safest form of tree stand restraint systems. Also shown is the climbing rope system.

Simply stated, all stand hunters should use some type of full-body harness. If a fall should occur, this device will keep the hunter in the upright position. With its leg support it will also allow the hunter to hang from the tree for an extended amount of time. Another advantage of this system is that it distributes your weight at several different points, thus reducing your chances of a restraint system injury. Some of these harnesses are as simple to put on as slipping on a vest. The decision is yours. A full-body restraint system can be purchased for less than \$50. It's senseless to save a few

If The Worst Should Happen

•Don't Panic. When a fall occurs, stay as calm as possible. If your restraint system is functioning properly, you should be able to hang from the tree for an extended period. If help is on the way, just wait. Don't try to get down on your own.

•Last Resort. If you become tangled in your restraint system and breathing becomes a problem, you may have to cut yourself free from the tree. Make sure you have a knife that is accessible to you at all times. A knife on the ground in your pack is of no use. This is always a last resort, but broken bones are better than the risk of asphyxiation.

I've often wondered what the Conservation Officer and my fellow bowhunter thought while looking down at me on the forest floor. Was I just another camo clad statistic and did he think about his own safety? Ironically, in less than one year he would find himself hanging helplessly from a tree in Illinois while buck hunting. What are the odds of that? Hmm, about one out of three.

Charles Teets is a wildlife manager for Wardensville WMA in Hardy County.

hunters without a safety harness. In some states such as Alabama, hunters hunting on state-owned lands are required to use a safety restraint system while hunting from a tree stand.

Restraint systems vary in effectiveness and price. Unfortunately, the least effective is the most affordable. The simple belt-type restraint costs little and can be quite dangerous to use. This type of system may ride up around your chest or neck during a fall, causing death. The possibility also exists of becoming inverted upside down. When this occurs the hunter often loses consciousness within just a few minutes. Some experts believe that it is better to use nothing at all rather than a simple belt or rope system. That may be true but both scenarios are unacceptable.

bucks on a safety system and take the chance of a life-changing accident or even death. Besides, the cost of an accident can be staggering. My accident education has totaled over \$57,000 dollars thus far.



Charles Teets

As West Virginia's hunting population ages, more hunters are choosing to use ground blinds instead of elevated stands.