

AT EASE IN THE TREES

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by Todd Richards

There aren't many activities I like better than treestand hunting. But this is not going to be another one of those articles that tries to convince you to abandon your still hunting ways and climb a tree. This is just about being comfortable if you choose to hunt from a tree. Since being comfortable on stand makes it easier to remain immobile and undetected by deer, at least some of the information I have to impart can be applied to ground stands as well.

Being comfortable is not just about wearing the right clothing. Clothing is obviously an important factor, but that subject is a book in itself. I started hunting in Massachusetts in 1983; not really that long ago, but a *world* ago in terms of comfortable hunting clothing. I started with waffle-textured longjohns that were either too hot or too cold. I had leather hunting boots that were either too hot or too cold. And I had cotton camo BDUs that were *always* just too cold.

Fortunately, things have changed for the better and technology has improved outdoor clothing and footwear to an incredible degree. I think I finally have the clothing part of hunting taken care of, but I am still desperately trying, through trial and mostly error, to figure out how to install a tree stand that not only inspires confidence through plenty of surrounding deer sign, but is also comfortable enough to allow me to sit tight for the unbelievably long time it takes to get a quality opportunity at a quality deer. (By "quality deer" I mean of course *any* deer; the first legal deer that gives me a quality opportunity, or, as my friends and I like to say: "Look at the BOOM!")

Since hunting with treestands became the "new thing" 20 years ago, we have all been subjected to volumes of articles dealing with the subject of using them to their full potential to rise above it all and take big bucks. We have read about treestand positioning in relation to trails, wind considerations, funnels, feed lots, bedding areas, escape lanes, blah, blah, blah. These articles fill us full of great information about getting a big buck (except how to pay your way into the exclusive, high quality opportunities the authors always seem to have — not that I'm jealous), but nobody ever seems to focus on the details. Problems us common folk face rarely get addressed: How do I avoid catching my important parts on tree steps while climbing in or out of my tree? Where do I hang my bow so I can reach it but not knock it to the ground? How do I cut shooting lanes big enough to shoot through (plus a little margin for error; I am prone to error) without transforming my shooting area into something resembling a sparsely wooded cul-de-sac?

My goal is to cover some of the overlooked details that will make your hunt more enjoyable and possibly more successful from a fixed-position treestand. I could probably write an entirely separate article on comfort tips for climbing tree-stands, but again, much of my information can be applied to them so this will have to suffice for now. I might not know how to shoot big bucks, but I sure do make a comfortable treestand. Simply add your hunting skills together with these tips, and you should really have it made.

Most of my comfort tips come with a story. Like the recipe book published by your home town, each tip came from a friend or acquaintance who cooks, or in this case, hunts. Many of these tips have been learned after some "friend" or other came down out of my tree stand whining about something that I "had to fix" (you know who you are). Some I actually figured out for myself.

Tree Selection

Where do we start? Well, thanks to the previous article in this issue, you should already know quite a bit about safety. All I will say is follow the advice: be safe, then be safer. Hurting yourself falling out of a tree is as embarrassing as showing up at the gates of heaven having to admit you stuck a knife in the toaster or died blow-drying your hair in the tub. If I have to tell you not to stick your hand in a moving snow-blower auger, you probably

won't survive the trip to the mailbox to get this issue of *Massachusetts Wildlife*. Following the safety instructions provided by Todd Olanyk in his aptly titled "Treestand Safety" should ensure a safe hunt.

Now let's get to the deer-woods and get started. You should already have done your scouting and picked out an area that is guaranteed to produce Rack-Zilla, Rack-Zilla's younger brother Mongo, or their petite but tasty nephew, Nubbins. That leaves you with many comfort-related choices. Let's start with the tree: find it, figure out how to get in it, how to sit in it for what seems like days, and, if we're lucky, shoot out of it.

The tree you select has to have many characteristics in order to be both effective and comfortable. Not only does it have to be in the right location to give you an excellent shot at a deer (by being down wind and adjacent to heavily used game trails), but it also has to have several other attributes to make it a place you will look forward to sitting in for hours and days. It has to be easy to climb, and it has to have grown in such a way that it offers a really nice place to put the stand, at a suitable height, on the appropriate side of the tree. It should provide you with some cover so you will not be silhouetted against the sky, and it should be in a position that balances cover from prevailing, seasonal winds against being blinded by the sunrise or sunset. That's a lot to ask from a tree. Let's see what we can do.

First off, I limit my tree selections to those with trunks I can easily reach my arms around. Using this handy gauge insures that the strap or chain on the stand will reach, and that installing safety straps and even climbing steps will be much easier.

I know I'm picky, but if I'm going to be in a tree, I'd like it to be a straight one. Crooked trees leave you hanging while climbing, or bent at odd angles in the stand. If you must use a "leaner," try to climb on the "top" side of the tree. Climbing on the "bottom" side leaves you dangling like a rock climber. I have enough excitement in my life without having to re-chalk my hands during a treestand ascent. Climbing the "bottom" side of the tree might seem only slightly challenging when you set up your stands in work clothes during the summer or fall, but when you try it in December, that sixteenth layer of insulation might impede your progress, and those icy steps might be difficult to grab while wearing what look like oven mitts. Eventually you will make a mistake, or just forget that you are older and clumsier than when you were 18. (Please remember my toaster analogy.)

It's easy to forget that while you may be *setting* your treestands during full-leaf conditions when the weather is warm and dry, you will be *using* your stands in all weather conditions and after leaf-fall. The difference will affect shooting lanes, tree step spacing, prevailing winds, and the weapon you will be bringing with you. Also remember that you will be taking stands down during very cold weather. The extended seasons in Massachusetts typically have you setting stands at the same time you're cleaning your wood stove for the winter, and pulling stands when it's so cold you feel like climbing into one! I'm not complaining...

Getting Up and Down

Now that the tree is selected and you have eye-balled where the stand will sit in a relatively level position, you have to plan your approach. What's the best route to get up there? Whether you use screw-in steps, strap-on steps, or climbing sticks, some planning is involved. I'll focus on the screw-in type for the most part, since that's the design I have used the most and found to be the most practical for me, but I will note here that if you use the strap-on style, you will now be very happy you chose a tree that was easy to reach around.

As you set tree steps, please remember that any friends, offspring or spouse that might want to use your treestand might not share your stride. It is always best to consider the most height-challenged individual in your circle as you screw in or hang your steps. I use my hand as a gauge to keep the distance between my steps consistent. The span from the tip of my thumb to the tip of my index finger, when stretched into the "L" position, is

6 inches. Three of these spans (18 inches) is a nice easy step for me and allows my less-than-average height friends to access safely as well. Larger spacing would make treestand installation quicker and use fewer steps, but will also lead to more gymnastics. I have no need to “stick the landing” when exiting my stand!

Tree step placement is crucial in setting up a comfortable treestand. I have friends who like to make it a challenge to get into a tree. Some believe this will discourage unethical “stand jumpers” from using their stand on public property; others just seem to like a challenge. I use a standard spacing and pattern with each tree so that I can access with ease, not “flying trap eze.” I had one friend who placed his steps so that you had to switch feet on the same step to access his whitetail “temple of doom.” Instead, use a couple more steps and make it comfortable.

Once I’m done with explaining how many steps I think you should install, you will be counting on your fingers (and toes) the number you will need to buy for the upcoming season. If you have the cash, get a bulk pack; if not, just pick up a couple each time you visit your favorite sporting goods store. They will add up quick and you won’t feel the cash pinch. I also recommend getting yourself a tree step installer. You will not need or use it for every step, but it comes in really handy on oak trees, as it gives you the torque you need to turn steps nearly effortlessly. Counter-intuitively, the big value of the installer is really for “de-installation.” Frozen trees (which they will be after the season when you take down your stand) don’t like to give up their steps. Ash trees, considering how easily they split as firewood, seem to have an exceptional ability to adopt tree steps as their own. I got sick of bashing my hands against steps or bringing a rock up into the tree to get them to turn. The installer will get that frozen step moving.

In addition to the steps placed every 18” or so, I also add several extra steps when I get to treestand height. I climb up the tree with the intention of stepping into the treestand with my right foot. This requires the last step to be placed so my left foot is as close to the stand as possible without risking severe eye and forehead injury. (When I climb up in the dark, I often forget that the last step is nearly over my head!) I also hang a step on the other side of the trunk directly opposite from where the stand will hang. This allows me to hook the stand chain or strap over the step to give me some added security, as well as something else to hold onto if I should need it.

Finally, I put in two last steps. One goes beside and just above the stand seat; the other goes one foot higher and on the other side of the seat. These steps serve multiple purposes. First, they allow me a multi-point grip as I enter and leave the stand. They are positioned so that I have my left hand low and left, my right hand high and right, when I step into the stand with my right foot. Second, they serve as handy places on which to hang things once I am in the tree. Third, if I get caught sitting down when a deer suddenly materializes close to my tree, they give me a brace from which to push myself slowly and silently up to a standing position without scraping my back up the noisy bark of the tree.

As a final note on steps, when hunting on privately owned land make sure you have permission to use the screw-in type. Un-install or loosen them after each season so the tree does not grow around them and make them impossible to remove. I know we have all likely done it in the past, but never install anything permanent (with bolts/nails/etc.). If you have ever destroyed several chainsaw teeth by biting into a giant nail someone left in a tree decades ago, you realize what a big deal it is.

Settling In

When considering the final hanging location for the stand, remember that sacrificing some treestand elevation is well worth having a level platform or having to cut one less giant pine branch. Height isn’t the only consideration in avoiding detection by deer. Just this past season I had opportunities at clueless deer from only 12 feet in height, yet I was “skylined” by a mature doe while sitting in the stratosphere!

Assess the surrounding woods or field edges, consider them in relation to the most likely paths from which deer may approach, and adjust your height to blend into the canopy. More important than altitude, the stand needs to be placed at a point on the tree where the platform will be level, or tilted slightly so the trunk end is down just a bit. If it's not right, move it. You will likely be in this tree several times this year and the extra initial work is well worth the calories required to move things.

This is a good place to bring up the concept of conditioning. Despite the best intentions to get in shape prior to the season, we almost never do. I recommend that you get in better shape. Having said that, I recommend that *I* get in better shape, too. Without exception, my resolution to exercise more isn't conceived on New Year's Eve, but rather while installing my first treestand of the year. Even with excellent safety equipment, installing a treestand is a physically taxing job. Take your time and do it right, even if it takes an extra hour to let your body relax a bit from time to time during the stand-setting process. Climb down out of the tree, have a look around, trim some small branches. Give your body the breaks it needs to help avoid the breaks it doesn't need!

Let's assume that you have the tree picked out, have installed the approved climbing materials, and have gained access into a level stand. If this is the case, I can picture the smile on your face (and the sweat running down it). The moment you sit down, you know if the stand is right. If it's wrong, once again come down, rest, reassess, and move or shift the stand if necessary. If it's right, then start making it into a comfortable hunting nest.

I already have a couple of nice places to hang stuff, but I'm not done yet. Someday I will bring less stuff. For now, however, I'll just install a few hangers. I hang a fold-out style bow-holder fairly high over my head, and a small hook-style bow-holder on which I clip my quiver of arrows. I remove the quiver from the bow, as this makes it much less bulky and allows me to shoot with more consistent accuracy. I practice my shooting without the quiver, so that's how I hunt. The quiver clipped into the tree allows me to get an arrow if I need it, and also keeps the arrows from cascading to the ground. I have in the past knocked my quiver to the ground, and on one occasion, my bow. The length of time it takes the quiver to hit the ground is a sober reminder that you are darn high in a tree (and that you need new broadheads).

Now let's start plotting the lane-clearing expedition. Lanes are just slots or holes you clear in the vegetation to give you clear shots to selected locations. The goal here is to cut as little as possible without severely hindering your ability to make a clean shot. Try to clear just a few holes in likely places and keep the brush-hogged lanes to a minimum. Clearing lanes in full leaf-out will make you want to cut it all. Fight the temptation.

Try to identify the boundaries of your lanes and shooting holes with objects that show up in any legal light. For example, if you cut a shooting "box" bounded on both sides by tree trunks and on top and bottom by large limbs from other trees, you will know there are no obstructions in the box as all boundaries will be clearly visible at all legal times.

Leaving a small branch dangling between two tree boles is just asking for trouble. It pays to be picky and thorough. Last year I had a deer feeding in range for 5 minutes, broadside to me, scratching carelessly. Unfortunately, there was one leaf, 3 feet away from me, covering all vital organs. She took two more steps, busted me, turned inside out and evaporated. I of course removed the confounding leaf afterwards, but few deer returned to stand in its former shadow.

Once you have the general sense of what your shooting holes and lanes will look like, pick some landmarks on the ground and hang your hat in the tree at head height. You should be able to figure out the proper lanes using these landmarks, and will only need to re-climb the tree a couple of times. Before you leave the tree, however, make sure to clip every little twig that will catch an arrow, your limbs, or your riser. You have to consider that the bow

will begin at arms length, and then add arrow length. I always have to remind myself how much room a rotating bow needs.

Instead of clearing ground-to-treestand height lanes, try to remove only the parts that need to be out of the way. Leaving branches and limbs in areas where you don't expect shots will give you some silhouette cover and allow you to draw the bow without being spotted. Remember, if the deer are in a spot where you can't see them, odds are good that they can't see you, either, and that is the time to make any moves necessary to prepare for the shot.

Once again you might be clearing lanes during full leaf out, so I will give you what might seem like a contradictory tip: small branches covered with leaves tend to dance around a lot on breezy days. If you cut the branches on a calm day, just try to clip them back an extra foot or two so you won't find your shooting holes filled with dancing branches on a breezy afternoon. Once the leaves fall, the branches sway far less in the breeze.

When you do feel compelled to clear full shooting lanes, try to construct them next to or parallel to some thick cover to give yourself an opportunity to draw undetected. Do not clear lanes all the way back to your tree at ground height. As you get closer to the tree, cut branches and limbs higher, leaving the lower vegetation intact. If you blaze that trail at ground height from one end to the other, the deer will simply adopt them for travel lanes. Once they turn into such a lane and start walking directly toward you, you have lost a clean and ethical shot and are now as obvious as a star on top of a Christmas tree! You are much better off cutting holes instead of lanes. As an extra bonus, leaving more cover close to the tree not only conceals movement, but really gives you the confidence that deer will walk right by you. That's a comfort tip all on its own.

As a final note on shooting holes, think ahead, way ahead: If this is a good location, you will likely be back in future years. Try to cut a little at a time or a little each year. If you try to accomplish too much at once, you will make a scar on the landscape that deer are sure to notice. Finally, when pruning in the treestand, make sure you remember to take all safety precautions. Leaning and reaching while up in the tree is tricky and inadvisable. Cut as much from the ground with a pole saw as possible and keep the high altitude tree pruning close to the body.

Etiquette

The topic of treestand etiquette can be contentious. We would all like to have about 1,000 acres to ourselves, but welcome to Massachusetts. Sometimes (all the time) we have to play with others. This especially applies to public land, but even private land often means competition, too, if a little more controlled. Etiquette on public land is a double-edged sword. While I would never install (or at least have never installed) a treestand within sight of somebody else's, public land is public: your stand does not rule out others using that patch of woods.

If I install a treestand, it does not mean I own the 200 yards around my tree. It obviously does not give me the right to steal or damage somebody else's property. Staring at somebody's stand while in my tree does, however, usually leave me mumbling to myself for awhile. The other edge of that double edge is for me to do my best not to set a stand that impacts somebody else's enjoyment or likelihood of getting a deer. I'd just rather go someplace else than worry about somebody showing up on the same day I'm there and having us stare at each other. This article is about treestand comfort. Staring at someone else from your stand is not a comfortable feeling.

I have by no means provided a complete list of the things you can and need to do to make a treestand more comfortable. I am sure everyone who has ever used one has their own advice as well. Please share your stand with others and always encourage folks to try the sport. The best way for people to learn to enjoy hunting is to be comfortable while doing it. By picking the right tree for your stand, placing tree steps at consistent spacing, and clearing simple shooting holes, you will improve your chances of deer hunting success. Being comfortable in your

stand means you will be more inclined to increase the hours you spend in it (which in itself will increase your chances of at least seeing deer), and even more important, when you are comfortable, you will be more relaxed and mentally prepared for any opportunities that might come your way.