

# Tree Stand Safety

**Massachusetts hunters often rely on the unique perspective and cover provided by the platform of a treestand.**

**Perched above the forest floor, sportsmen and women can take in the view and apply their skills. Treestand-related accidents have increased with the rise in treestand use. Learn what you need to know to stay safe in the trees.**



Years ago it was common practice for hunters to construct their own stands out of whatever scrap lumber they had on hand. But even the best of these homemade stands rot and fall apart under the combined forces of tree growth and New England weather. Fortunately, today's manufactured portable treestands offer many options to hunters. Stands endorsed by the Treestand Manufacturer's Association go through extensive testing to ensure they are properly engineered and constructed. Modern stands and climbing equipment are safer, but basic safety precautions are still required to avoid a potentially life-threatening fall:

- Follow all the manufacturer's instructions for your equipment. Each manufacturer may have a slightly different system for attaching and using a stand, so it's important to read and understand your particular model.
- Practice setting up your stand at ground level so you become familiar with your equipment well before the hunting season.
- Inspect the stand for damage or wear before each use. Any stand can break or wear out over time. Buckles can get damaged in storage, straps can be damaged by rodents, etc. Check equipment at home before you take to the field; the last thing you want to do is lug a stand into the woods only to find out that you are missing a piece or that a component has been damaged.
- Make sure the tree you select is alive, healthy, straight, and large enough to support your weight and to work properly with the stand's mounting hardware. It's important to avoid selecting a leaning or unhealthy tree even if it's in the perfect location. Remember, hunting happens in all kinds of weather conditions. Sitting in a dead tree during a gusting wind storm is not a good thing. Make sure that surrounding trees will not pose a threat; avoid locations where large, dead limbs may fall on you or your stand.
- Don't leave a stand attached for more than two weeks without adjusting the mounting hardware to account for tree growth, movement, and other factors.
- **Always use a Full Body Fall Arrest Harness System (FBFAHS).** No treestand hunter should be without this critical piece of equipment. Just as you need to practice setting up your stand at ground level, you should also practice using your FBFAHS at ground level with a helper.
- Setting up or taking down your stand is a particularly dangerous time since you need your hands to be free. Use a lineman's belt to keep you connected to the tree at all times. The lineman's belt should attach directly to your FBFAHS and allow you freedom of movement while preventing a fall.
- If using a hang-on stand, you will need to secure a climbing device (sticks or ladder) as well. Position your climbing device and stand so that you step **down** onto the **center** of the platform when you arrive at your perch.

If the last step is too low and you are forced to step up onto the platform, or onto one side of it, the unbalanced weight may cause the platform to shift. Likewise, when leaving the stand, keep your weight centered on the platform as you step up and off of it.

- When using a hang-on or ladder stand, use the “three point method” when climbing, and always use a haul line. These two rules go together. Most accidents happen when hunters climb into or out of the stand, and this tends to be the time when many hunters get careless about staying connected to the tree. When climbing, make sure you are in contact with your climbing device(s) with three points at all times (both feet and one hand or two hands and a foot). Obviously, your hands should be free for climbing; use a haul line to transport gear up and down.
- Use a haul line to pass your equipment up or down from the stand. Firearms should be unloaded and arrows should be quivered during this time. The line should not be tied through the trigger guard of a firearm, or in such a way that the muzzle will point up toward you, or down into the dirt/snow, while it is suspended. Covering the muzzle with a glove when hauling will prevent the barrel from collecting any potential obstructions. When hauling a bow, the exposed arrow fletching should be pointed down when hauling up, and up when lowering the bow. This protects the fletching from potentially damaging bumps and snags. The broadheads are already protected by the quiver.
- Remain attached to the tree at all times. One method is to use a climbing rope. Once the stand is secured in place, attach a length of climbing rope above the platform level, and then to the base of the tree for a hang-on stand, or to the base of the ladder. The rope should be taut and placed so you won't get tangled in it during a climb, but adjacent to the ladder or climbing stick so that you can reach it in the event of a fall. Use a prusik knot on this rope (available where you buy your FBFAHS, climbing rope, or online) and

attach your tether to the climbing line via the carabiner on the prusik knot during the entire ascent/descent from the stand. The key, as always, is to remain attached at all times!

- The tether of your FBFAHS should be adjusted so that you will not hang lower than the level of your stand in the event of a fall. In other words, when you are seated in your stand, the tether of your FBFAHS should be attached to the tree strap so that there is very little slack.
- Never place your stand higher than 16 feet. The added danger of going higher than 16 feet or so isn't worth any perceived advantage. In fact, the higher you place your stand, the worse your shooting angles and opportunities become. A stand placed between 8–16 feet high retains the advantages of getting you up out of the animal's line of sight and smell, but also allows for ethical shot placement nearly anywhere within your range other than directly below the stand.

Hunting in a safe, responsible, ethical way should be paramount in the hunter's outdoor pursuits. Following these basic treestand safety rules will help ensure that you get home safely and will be able to enjoy many more hunts in the future. Those who want to learn more about treestand safety have many resources. Experienced and beginning hunters alike are encouraged to take Bowhunter Education, a (free) advanced course offered by MassWildlife's Hunter Education Program; learn more at [mass.gov/dfw/huntered](http://mass.gov/dfw/huntered). Read more about treestand hunting and safety at [mass.gov/dfw/treestand](http://mass.gov/dfw/treestand). And for even more, check out [nbef.org](http://nbef.org) (National Bowhunter Education Foundation) and [tmastands.com](http://tmastands.com) (Treestand Manufacturer's Association).

*This is an excerpt from a 2008 article, written by MassWildlife's Todd Olanyk, in Massachusetts Wildlife Magazine. MA Hunter Education Volunteer Instructor, Paul Topham, appears in the safety demonstration photos. For expanded treestand hunting and safety information visit [mass.gov/dfw/treestand](http://mass.gov/dfw/treestand).*

## Full Body Fall Arrest Harness Systems

Modern FBFAHS gear includes different styles of full body harnesses which distribute the impact of a fall and greatly reduces the potential for injury. Their design also helps ensure that a fall victim is in an upright position, improving chance of recovery. The full body harness is the only style that we recommend today. The FAS is not a piece of equipment to take lightly. Go ahead and price shop on stands, but do not buy a cheap fall arrest device: your life does depend on it!

Hanging around after a fall for too long in even the best gear can cause suspension trauma and death, so it's important to practice suspension relief while in the harness, and recovering from the suspended position. **Do not** attempt this without a helper. When practicing, always set up so that your feet can easily reach the ground to stand if needed.

Harness Systems have an expiration date; be sure to check your equipment and replace any expired components. In addition, the FBFAHS must be discarded and replaced after a fall has occurred.



Photo © Bill Byrne

**Practice suspension relief and recovery while in the harness; do not attempt this alone. Set up so your feet can easily reach the ground to stand if needed.**



Photo © Bill Byrne

**There should be very little slack between the Full Body Fall Arrest Harness System and the tree.**



Photo © Bill Byrne

**Always set your steps so that you step down onto the center of your stand platform when entering; otherwise the platform may shift under your weight. Reverse the process when exiting the stand, keeping your weight centered on the platform.**