

N.Y. / REGION

For Hunters in the Woods, a Quiet Killer: Tree Stands

By COREY KILGANNON DEC. 22, 2017

Jeff Callahan can still recall the morning he dozed off while hunting deer from a homemade tree-stand in upstate New York.

The resulting fall — a 13-foot plunge that caused a spinal injury and left him paralyzed from the neck down — was avoidable, he said, if only he had followed precautions and tethered himself to the tree with a safety line.

“Some guys think they’re indestructible, and that’s what I thought too,” said Mr. Callahan, 57, who now hunts from his wheelchair. Even aiming with his teeth and firing with the help of a breathing tube, he has bagged many deer with both shotgun and crossbow.

“They call me one-shot,” he said.

While the topic of dangerous hunting mishaps has long seemed synonymous with gun-related incidents, there is now a more deadly category: falls from tree stands that have become increasingly popular among gun and bow hunters seeking a high vantage point.

Tree stand mishaps are not a new phenomenon, but have become chronic enough that, this year for the first time, New York State’s Department of Environmental Conservation, which regulates hunting, has begun collecting information about such accidents from local authorities to better monitor and study the problem, said the agency’s commissioner, Basil Seggos.

As this year's deer hunting season winds down, New York State officials report only one gun-related fatality among hunters this year, while at least five people have died statewide while hunting from tree stands — many more have been injured.

State officials reported one tree stand death last year, but said that there may have been others, since they had not started to systematically begin tracking the incidents. Mr. Seggos said he had “heard at least anecdotally that a number of people die or get injured each year” from tree stand falls and mishaps, but lacked hard information.

“I wanted to begin tracking them, to see where the problems were,” he said.

Gun mishaps, the longtime scourge of hunting season, have been declining for decades because of safety awareness initiatives such as orange clothing meant to deter accidental shootings, said Glen Mayhew, president of the national Tree Stand Safety Awareness Foundation.

“But we've seen tree stand incidents go up, because although people know they should wear harnesses, many still aren't wearing them,” said Dr. Mayhew, adding that the mishaps continue despite persistent efforts to educate hunters about tree stand safety, the most important rule being the use of a safety line and harness attached to the tree both while in the stand and while climbing in and out.

Several thousand hunters fall from tree stands each year nationwide — with roughly 4,000 falls in 2015 — and states where hunters use tree stands typically have a fatality or two a year, Dr. Mayhew said. “So to see five fatalities from one state in a year, is an outlier, or unusually high,” he said of New York's figures.

Mr. Seggos said his agency relies on some 2,500 teaching volunteers for its hunter safety program, and that about 45,000 hunters took advantage of the 1,500 courses given this year whose curriculum includes safety instruction on the stands, which often consist of a seat and a small platform that are fastened onto a tree's trunk above brush lines and above an animal's ability to spot or smell a hunter.

Also, he said, the agency has created online videos on tree stand safety, posted online notifications, and put out advisories on social media.

Of the five tree stand fatalities in New York in recent months, one is still under

investigation, officials said. One was caused by the failure of a tree stand, and another victim likely fell while entering or exiting a stand, a particularly common circumstance. The two other victims fell after having heart attacks, state officials said.

For some hunters, carrying equipment long distances to hunting locations and then climbing up to the stand can increase the chances of a heart attack, Dr. Mayhew said. Strapping into the stand can help a hunter survive a heart attack by enabling him to phone or signal for help, he said.

Dr. Michael F. Kamali, who runs the emergency department at the University of Rochester Medical Center, said hunters are brought in perhaps once a week — usually still in their hunting outfits — after tree stand falls, with injuries that range from “minor to very significant to life threatening.”

Chris Nutter, 57, a hunter who lives near Syracuse, and teaches bow hunting safety said he knows numerous hunters who have suffered broken limbs and spinal injuries from falls. Two hunters died in tree stand accidents in 2015 in Onondaga County, which includes Syracuse, he said.

As a young man, Mr. Nutter said he sometimes felt impervious enough to neglect safety practices — “I was 8 foot tall and bulletproof” — and fell twice from his stand while in his 20s, but avoided lasting injury.

Many hunters called tree stand accidents far more frequent than official figures indicate, because hunters are often reluctant to tell medical or law enforcement that they fell from a stand.

“A hunter who goes to the E.R. is not going to admit they fell out of a tree stand,” said Bill Conners, 71, a lifelong hunter from Dutchess County who writes about conservation issues and serves as a regional director of the New York State Conservation Council. “Either out of embarrassment, or because they didn’t tell their wives or bosses they went hunting.”

In fact, many hunters favor hunting alone and lose communication after a fall, especially if cellphone service is spotty.

Years ago, many hunters built wooden tree stands, but affordable manufactured stands have become the norm. Many are left up year-round and become weakened over time, Mr. Conners said.

Hunters often access the stands by rudimentary ladders, which can be tricky while wearing bulky winter clothing and lugging equipment, especially in icy conditions. Falls can be caused by alcohol, fatigue, sudden moves with a weapon and even excitement.

“When deer comes along, or a squirrel jumps onto your head, you might suddenly take a step back and you’re not standing on anything anymore,” said David Hartman, the president of New York State Whitetail Management Coalition.

It was sleepiness that caused Mr. Callahan’s fall in 1986. He now hunts from his wheelchair with the assistance of a friend. He finds flat areas in the woods or a field to roll onto, and behind camouflage material, rests his crossbow or shotgun onto a shooter’s rest. He aims it with a bar controlled by his teeth and activates the trigger with an air tube.

“I’ve talked to so many hunters who have fallen out of trees,” he said. “So the first thing I tell any hunter is to learn from my experience and put your safety strap on.”

A version of this article appears in print on December 23, 2017, on Page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: Hunters With a Perch Are Becoming Casualties Themselves.