

Climbing the Treestand: A Bowhunter's First Season

I was halfway up the tree. My white-knuckle grip on the rung of my treestand ladder did nothing to keep my sweaty palms from slipping on the smooth, cold metal. I just knew this was the end. I was going slip, fall and die.

Before I took the inevitable fall, I looked down at Zac, my coworker and hunting partner for the season. The ground heaved and swayed around him. Every muscle in my body was tense, my stomach churned and I tried to beat back the paralyzing fog of vertigo.

"I am going to kill you." The words escaped my mouth and were flung toward Zac. Although we had practiced climbing into stands for weeks, this particular setup, an actual deer-hunting set, was much higher than those introductory ones.



I climbed back down the ladder, ready to give up and tell him we were packing and going home. When my feet hit the ground my legs bounced up and down with nervousness. Zac didn't say a word, knowing now was not the time to mess with me. I took a minute to gather myself before I reached into my bag and pulled out my gloves. Known to be hardheaded, I was not going to let my fear of heights get the best of me.

Gloves on, I grabbed the first rung and started climbing. I could feel the tree swaying and my hands felt cramped. I wrapped my arms around the cold metal to give them a break and closed my eyes. I took two long breaths and gathered my composure. "Let's go" is all I remember saying to myself. My feet hit the platform and with shaking hands I unclashed my carabiner from my safety rope. I reached the inch-and-a-half to attach it to my safety strap and with the "clink" of closure from the clasp; I felt a weight come off my shoulders. I was bowhunting for the first time.

The evening was beautiful. The woods were alive with the sights and smells of fall and the blue sky added a perfect touch. For hours I was able to escape the busy, bustling life of a 25-year old trying to make my way in the world and just sit. The sun was shining through the leaves as a light wind blew from the north. Calmly, I inhaled, and started thinking I could get used to this.

Despite the heat, Zac and I had two young bucks and three mature does walk into our setup. Looking for a certain buck we've nicknamed "Splits," we let the others pass. Four hours later, and too dark to spot anymore action on the ground, my first day of bowhunting was complete. I walked out of the woods with a sense of accomplishment and looked forward to the next day.

We chose a different location for our Sunday hunt. This time we had the convenience of hunting from an elevated ground blind. Hoping to fill my doe tag, I felt confident that I would make it happen with the

cooler temperatures and a location that was known for its doe movement. I felt strangely at ease when the first doe walked in; a feeling I was not expecting.

The doe walked in slowly, not aware of our presence, and lowered her head to eat the acorns that littered the ground. I realized then that I had been sitting stiff as a board and needed to prepare myself. I slowly latched my release to my string, and moved at a snail's pace to turn my body to a comfortable shooting position.

This was the moment I had been waiting for! Suddenly the feeling of ease was erased with pounding heartbeats that I was sure the doe could hear from 20 yards away. A million questions ran through my head at once and it was like I had forgotten everything I had learned over the past few months. "My sites are 10, 20, 30...no, no, no, they are 20, 30, 40. I can't remember!"

Her body turned presenting me with a perfect shot. A whispered "now" came from Zac, and I took a deep breath and drew my bow. I knew she was 22 yards away, so I lined up her vitals in between my second and third pins. Suddenly, the world around me was no more and it was just me and the section of her body I was aiming for. My heartbeat succumbed, I couldn't hear Zac, and everything around me except the fury patch I was aiming for was blurry. This wasn't just an activity anymore; this was something I wanted to succeed at.

I released a slow breathe and pulled the trigger. The doe jumped at the sound and the arrow flew exactly where I had aimed...right over her back. We weren't positive, and I sat in the blind knowing I had just taken my first shot at a deer. Zac smiled proudly at me, and we sat for a few minutes before going to retrieve my arrow.

I had nicked the top of the doe, proof coming in the form of hair found in the edges of my broadhead that was wedged into the ground 5 yards behind where the doe had stood. It was confirmed that my second guessing of what my sites were tuned into were 20, 30, 40 yards, and not 10, 20, 30. Rookie mistake on my part.

Feeling defeated, I convinced myself that it was bound to happen. "Do you know how many big bucks I have shot over?" Zac reminded me.

Despite my miss, my first weekend with a bow was more than I could have asked for. I had climbed a daunting tree stand and taken a shot on my second day in the woods. To me, that was something to be proud of and the season is already appearing promising.