

Don't hunt from a treestand without a safety harness— IT'S MONEY WELL SPENT

It was only 28 feet, but David Bufkin of Autaugaville said it seemed to take forever to fall that far out of a treestand.



David Bufkin

“It seemed like it took five minutes for me to hit the ground,” said Bufkin, who was one of the fortunate ones who survived a treestand accident.

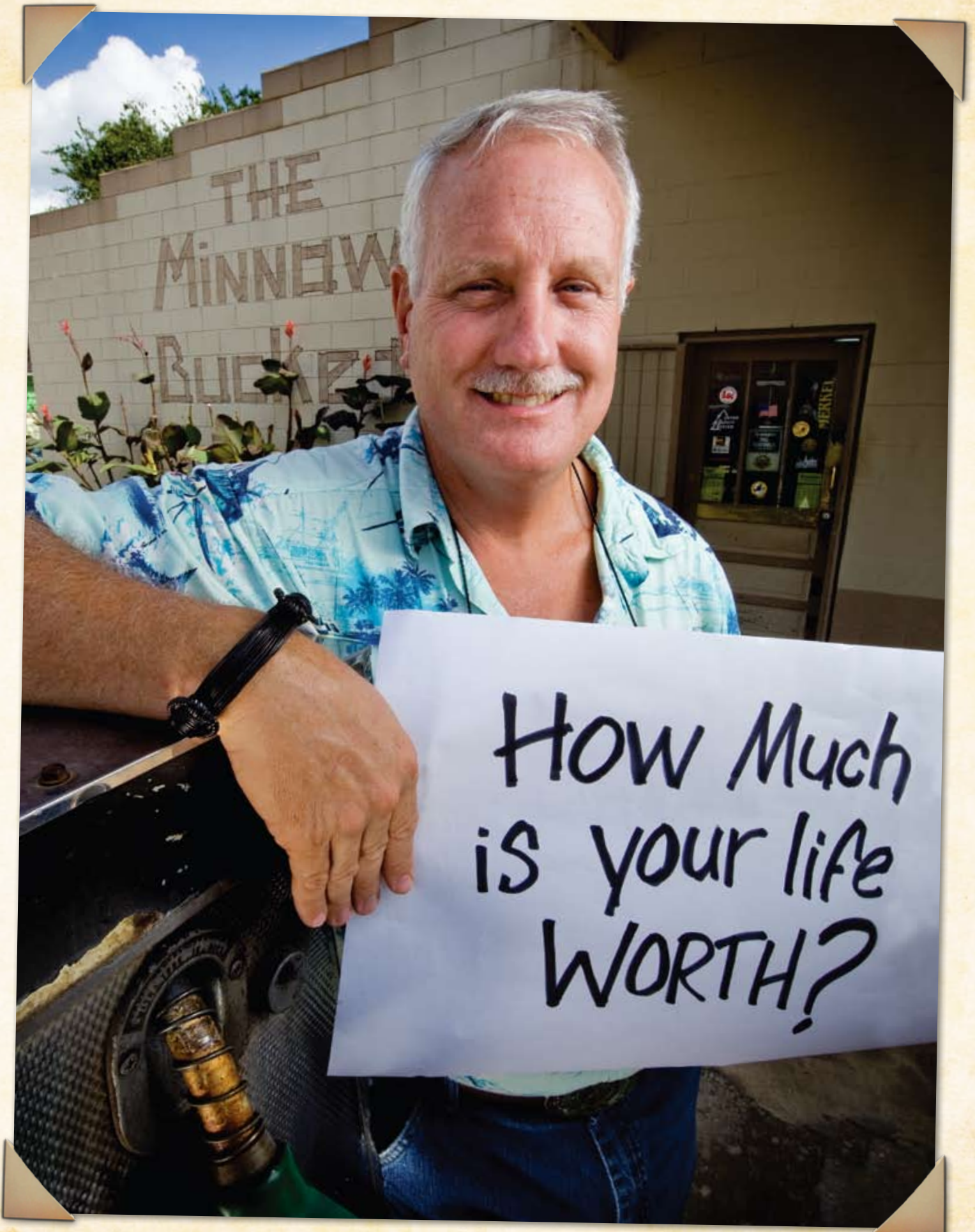
Since the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) started keeping track of hunting-related accidents in 1973, there have been 24 fatalities from treestand accidents and 282 non-fatal accidents that have been reported. Many other injuries from treestand mishaps are not reported.



By David Rainer, Staff Writer // Photography by Billy Pope



Using a full body harness from the time you leave the ground until you return is the best way to hunt safely from a treestand.



Leading Cause of Injuries

"I'd say treestand accidents have been the leading cause of injury to hunters for the past 20 years," said Ray Metzler, ADCNR's Hunter Education Coordinator. "With firearms accidents, we pretty much know when they happen. Treestand accidents – there's no mandatory reporting. From what we hear through the grapevine, my gut feeling is there are a lot that go unreported."

Metzler said most people fall in transition, either climbing the tree or getting in or out of the treestand, which means it is extremely important to be attached to the tree in some fashion during the entire ascent and descent of the tree.

"If you fall just right from 5 feet you can be dead," Metzler emphasized.

Don't Be a Statistic

Metzler said there are a number of steps hunters can take to escape becoming a statistic. "First and foremost, use a full body harness from the time you leave the ground until you come back down," he said. You also have to make sure you've got a good tree for your stand to be in – preferably a straight, healthy tree with no bark missing or cankers in it. Look for a tree that your stand will bite into. Some trees, like hickory, are too hard and the stand can't get a good bite. And the tree can be too big or too small. It depends on the manufacturer's guidelines. Every stand comes with instructions that tell the minimum and maximum diameters. You certainly want to read and follow those instructions.

"One of the other things we've started to talk about in our hunter safety courses is self-extraction – how do you get out of a tree if the stand breaks or you slip and the harness catches you," Metzler said. "The Consumer Products Safety Commission is working with the manufacturers to develop devices called tree descenders. You're attached to tree whole time you're off the ground. If you fall, it allows you to screw a step into the tree. Move each down a little at the time. People have hung in the harness and haven't been able to get to the ground. Somebody would have to go up the tree to get them out. The industry is starting to make things to help you safely get back to the ground."

"In our hunter education field days, we put on a prussic knot and demonstrate how to slide it up and down the rope as you climb up the steps of the ladder. When you get seated, you adjust the line attached to

the tree to where if you do fall, you won't fall more than 5 or 6 inches. That way you can swing back around and get back in the stand, or get back on the ladder or steps."

Metzler also suggests that hunters take the time to practice with the harness before hunting season to get reacquainted with the safety equipment.

"A lot of people think a harness is too hard to get on or off and won't wear it," he said. "If they'll just take 10-15 minutes before the season, it's no problem to put on. I think we've come a long way in the last 10 years. You see more and more harnesses sold and when we ask in class about harnesses, we have more and more people say they wear full-body harnesses. Hopefully, treestand accidents will go down like firearms accidents have."

Money Well Spent

For those who say they can't afford a full body harness, Metzler says that's a poor excuse.

"How much is your life worth?" he said. "That's what I ask my students. A harness costs anywhere from \$69 to \$129. My life is certainly worth more than \$69. I'm not getting in a tree without one. It's senseless to even think about not wearing a harness."

Summit Treestands has solved that harness problem. A harness is provided free for those who buy one of the Decatur company's treestands.

"One of the major things that has happened in our industry is the advent of the Treestand Manufacturers Association," said Keith Jones, Product Development Manager at Summit. "Manufacturers that are members of that association have to pass certification through stringent testing by independent labs to be able to put the TMA label on their treestands. Dealers are actually looking for that label now before they will carry a treestand."

"And, in order to be a TMA-certified treestand, a four-point body harness must be furnished with the stand. Now a consumer doesn't have to buy a harness. It comes with it."

Jones said, unfortunately, there's no way to ensure that consumers will use the harness. "From a safety standpoint, that's the No. 1 problem – not wearing the harnesses," he said. "There's no excuse because they get it free. If you look at accidents from all the states, not just Alabama, probably 95 percent, if not more, are related to the simple fact they didn't have a harness on."

Echoing Metzler's statement, Jones said more and more emphasis is being placed on treestand safety.

ALABAMA TREESTAND INCIDENT STATISTICS

YEAR	NON-FATAL	FATAL	TOTAL
1973-74	2	0	2
1974-75	0	0	0
1975-76	0	0	0
1976-77	0	0	0
1977-78	1	0	1
1978-79	4	1	5
1979-80	3	0	3
1980-81	1	1	1
1981-82	5	0	5
1982-83	3	2	5
1983-84	6	0	6
1984-85	4	0	4
1985-86	6	0	6
1986-87	8	0	8
1987-88	6	0	6
1988-89	12	2	14
1989-90	7	0	7
1990-91	6	0	6
1991-92	13	2	15
1992-93	9	0	9
1993-94*	8	1	9
1994-95	24	1	25
1995-96	10	1	11
1996-97	18	2	20
1997-98	14	1	15
1998-99	7	2	9
1999-00	19	3	22
2000-01	14	0	14
2001-02	17	0	17
2002-03	7	0	7
2003-04	9	1	10
2004-05	9	3	12
2005-06	9	0	9
2006-07	9	1	10
2007-08	12	0	12

*Hunter education became mandatory in Alabama for those born after August 1, 1977.
Source: Alabama Hunter Education Program



David Bufkin looks at the tree where he fell from his treestand. Although he was wearing a safety belt, it was not attached to the tree at the time of the fall. He suffered three broken ribs, a punctured lung and a broken hip.

“Education has come a long, long way,” Jones said. “Treestand safety has become a big part of the hunter safety class. In the past, it was kind of skimmed over. Now there is a lot more detail and they promote the use of harnesses.

“Years ago, when we first started in the harness industry, it was hard to get a guy to wear a full-body harness. The perception was that you couldn’t hunt in one because it was too bulky or too restrictive. We’ve proved that wasn’t true. Harnesses that are made now are simple to put on. Climbing belts now come with the harness so you are secured to the tree the entire time you’re climbing.”

Summit’s harnesses also come with a Suspension Relief Strap (SRS) to be used in case of a fall. “The SRS is sewn right onto the belt of the harness,” Jones said. “So now the consumer, if he happens to fall, can deploy the relief strap and relieve pressure off those leg straps. There are several systems on the market where a guy can be hooked up from the time he leaves the ground until he gets up in his stand and back down on the ground again.

“The industry has really addressed a lot of the safety issues. If the consumer would just take advantage of what’s available to him, we shouldn’t see treestand accidents. Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to push that magic button, yet, to get everybody to wear a harness and stay hooked up the whole time.”

A Painful Fall

For Bufkin, he was wearing a safety belt. Obviously, though, he was not hooked to the tree at the time of the accident.

“I was placing a lock-on stand on property behind my house,” said the 46-year-old Bufkin, County Engineer for Autauga County. “My daughter was back there with me. I hadn’t put the steps in the tree, yet. I was climbing the limbs. I put the stand up and stepped into the stand, but I had placed it a little too high. There was a limb above me that was in the way. I got out of it and was standing on a big limb. I moved the stand down. It was one of the stands that has the safety chain where you place the loop into a slot.

“After I placed it back again, I stepped into the stand. I had my safety belt on the whole time. I just had to take it off the tree when I would go around a limb. I had taken it off to step over the limb to get into the stand, and when I stepped into the stand I straightened up. I had the safety belt in my hand fixing to hook it around the tree, and

the stand popped off the tree.” Bufkin fell backward out of the stand.

“The way I fell out of it, I thought I was going to hit on my head and neck, so I twisted in the air,” he said. “I felt that if I had fallen straight back I would have landed on my neck and it would have broken my neck. I twisted but I still couldn’t see the ground coming. You know it’s coming, but everything is in slow motion. The good thing was I had just plowed the field and there were no limbs or stobs that could have stuck in me.

“When I hit the ground it knocked the breath out of me and I couldn’t catch my breath. My daughter was sitting in our golf cart waiting on me. She came over but it was several minutes before I could talk to her because I couldn’t catch my breath. One thing was I thought I had dislocated my shoulder because I couldn’t move my arm. My leg was twisted up under me. Finally I twisted around enough that I could get a breath and I started trying to move everything. Everything worked, but there was a lot of pain and it was hard to breathe.”

His daughter got on the cell phone and called 911. Somehow, the call got routed to Lowndes County instead of Autauga. In the meantime, Bufkin’s daughter called the Minnow Bucket, an outdoors sporting goods store in Autaugaville and soon several people showed up at the accident site.

“They said when they saw me lying there they thought I was dead because I was so white,” Bufkin said. “They called the ambulance to find out where it was and it had never been dispatched. The 911 call, for some reason, hadn’t been transferred to Autauga County. I had been laying there for 30 minutes already, so it was another 30 minutes before the ambulance got there. They loaded me on the stretcher and got me to the hospital.”

Bufkin’s injuries included three broken ribs, a punctured lung and a broken hip.

“They thought it was bad,” he said. “They thought they were going to have to do surgery, but they said they were going to wait and take more X-rays the next day. They kept looking at my lung and it only had a small hole and it had sealed itself up. My hip was more of a problem. I had ribs broken on my left side and a hip broken on my right side. That’s how much energy was transferred through my body when I hit the ground. I wasn’t much help getting in and out of the bed.”

Doctors decided the broken hip would require extensive rehabilitation instead of surgery. He spent seven days in rehab and then was supposed to be a wheelchair for two to three months. However, Bufkin said he didn’t adapt well to the wheelchair and convinced his orthopedic doctor to let him use crutches.

The rehab was going well until a blood clot formed in his leg and back to the hospital he went.

“My leg swelled up like a football,” Bufkin said. “I had to take Coumadin (blood thinner) for a year, but my hip healed up great. My ribs hurt for two years, but I haven’t had any pain in over a year.


Hunting Again

“I was extremely lucky. If the ground hadn’t just been plowed or if I had been in the woods with stobs or a stump sticking up, it would have caused a lot more injuries or I might not have made it.”

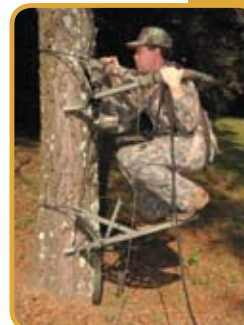
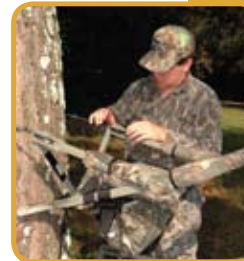
Despite the pain he endured, Bufkin started making plans to get back into the woods the very next year.

“My wife said, ‘You aren’t going to get in a tree again?’” he recalled. “I said, ‘Yeah, I am.’ She said, ‘I can’t believe you’re going to get back in a stand.’ I told her that if you have a car wreck you don’t quit driving, you’re just more careful. By November I was hunting again, and I was climbing into a treestand again by the end of deer season.”

Now, however, Bufkin doesn’t take anything for granted.

“I had always used safety belt, but I went out and got a Hunter Safety System vest,” he said. “I am a lot more careful about how I climb a tree and how I get into the stand. I pay a lot more attention to stuff than I used to. I really watch what I’m doing. I don’t want to go through that again.” 

8 Tips for Treestand Safety



1. Use a full body harness from the time you leave the ground until you come back down.
2. Choose a straight, healthy tree.
3. Inspect your treestand at the beginning of the season and before each use.
4. Make sure your stand is fastened to the tree securely and that the tree is the right size.
5. Test your treestand slightly off the ground to make sure it is safe.
6. Unload your gun prior to pulling it up with a strong cord or rope.
7. Avoid excessive movement that could cause you to lose your balance.
8. Clear away obstructive branches before shooting from a stand.