



Shooting From a Tree Stand

When the autumn woods are as dry and crunchy as corn flakes, archers may be best off sitting motionless in ambush with little or no chance of being heard. Under any circumstances, a big game animal is less likely to detect a hunter perched well above their direct line of smell and sight. Deer are certainly alert for human danger in the treetops, only dumb deer do not look up. But a platform artfully tucked amid overhead foliage always provides a major bowhunting advantage. Taking a tree stand beats the heck out of sneaking on foot or waiting for deer at more exposed ground level.

Shooting downward is different than shooting at level targets. Even the best bull's-eye shooters and 3-D archers often have trouble hitting real whitetail deer, elk, or bear from tree stands. Here are some tips on mastering this unique form of shooting.

First you must understand that sharp downward shots always threaten conventional archery form. If you do not bend at the waist as you aim, upper-body geometry can change. This will alter anchor point and line of sight, and also drive the bowstring closer to clothing along the chest. Since bowhunters in trees typically wear bulky upper-body garments to keep warm, bowstring collision and wobbly arrow flight are likely. This can ruin accuracy with flight-finicky fixed-blade broadheads.

Preserving upper-body shooting form from a tree can be easy. First, wear a stout tree stand safety belt when in a platform stand. Adjust this belt so you can lean against it solidly as you bend sharply yet comfortably at the waist.

Second, use a bowstring peep to guard against changing anchor points and head angles on downward shots. A hunting peep should have an aperture at least 1/8-inch in diameter to ensure easy aiming in low light situations.

Third, practice shooting from favored tree stands well before archery season begins. If you choose to shoot while sitting down on a swiveling stool or tree sling, practice is especially important. It will take awhile to work out the kinks in your technique.

Regardless of shooting form, many savvy tree-stand hunters wear archery chest protectors to flatten clothing near the bowstring path. They know the slightest contact between string and fabric caused by downward shooting angle can send a broadhead arrow wild.

Arrows shot downward from a tree always impact higher than normal because gravitational effect on the arrow is reduced. The sharper the shooting angle and the slower the bow, the higher an arrow is likely to hit.

Shooting at animals from a stand 10 to 30 feet above terra firma creates two other aiming difficulties not directly related to trajectory. Both problems can cause arrows to hit above the mark.

First, deer look smaller and farther away when viewed from above. Experienced bowhunters overcome this optical illusion by using an archery rangefinder on landmarks around their stands, or on animals directly. Another solution is pacing off ranges from the base of your tree-stand tree, and marking these distances with highly visible stakes, rocks, or twigs. If you know the range to a deer, you won't be tempted to aim high.

Another shooting problem is a deer's natural tendency to crouch at the sound of a bow—even a quiet hunting bow with rubber-loaded or hydraulic stabilizer, string silencers, and fairly heavy, vibration-absorbing arrows. The average whitetail deer caught on videotape crouches 2 to 4 inches before the arrow arrives, creating a very real problem for the hunter. Since a deer's chest cavity is only 8 inches deep, wise tree stand bowhunters always aim for the heart, which lies near the bottom of this vital zone. A deer that crouches takes the arrow dead-center for a quick, humane kill.

Tree stand bowhunters learn to compensate for an arrow's general tendency to hit high. Some simply practice aiming low from a tree stand. Others sight-in from a tree stand for even ranges like 10,20,30 and 40 yards.

When shooting a deer from a tree, be sure to use overhead foliage to your best advantage. Effective stand set-ups surround the hunter with heavy limbs or leaves for good camouflage. Remember: deer and other hunter-shy animals sometimes look up. Place your stands so you can draw your bow without bumping nearby shrubbery. Trim out narrow gaps or lanes that allow clear shots at animals passing nearby. The trick is drawing just before your target animal moves into view.

If you take the foregoing precautions, good accuracy from a tree stand is not all that difficult to achieve!