

BOWHUNTING's Guide to Tree Saddle Hunting

A new generation of highly mobile bowhunters is embracing the lightweight comfort and versatility of tree saddle hunting.



May 15, 2019

By Greg Staggs

Have I told you how much I'm enjoying my saddle?"

It was the third text I'd received from friend Scott Hesterly in as many days. To say he was excited about his new tree saddle would be an understatement. He'd sent picture after picture of the various new parts of his saddle rig, from rope bridges and tethers to various carabiners and nifty little platforms he was experimenting with. To a seasoned treestand hunter, it all seemed a bit much.

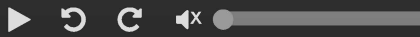
I have to admit, though, I was intrigued. I consider myself a pretty hardcore bowhunter, and I take pride in going deep into places most people wouldn't consider. That often means carrying a minimal amount of gear with extremely spartan accommodations. I'm the guy who's willing to grind the hours away sitting on a half-inch piece of foam padding atop a Lone Wolf hand climber. Scott places much more of a premium on comfort than I do, which is why I was a bit confused about his newfound enthusiasm for saddle hunting.

Like most bowhunters, I'd heard of saddle hunting before. I even own a couple of books authored by John Eberhart, widely considered to be the "godfather" of saddle hunting. To be honest, though, the concept never really caught my attention. I think I looked at the pictures of his saddle and skipped over the chapters detailing his setup, which he labeled an "ambush hunting sling."

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Now — years after my first exposure to saddle hunting — here was my buddy (who I honestly didn't consider as “hardcore” as me) touting its virtues. Not only was he telling me how comfortable it was, he was talking about things that mattered a whole lot to me, such as reduced pack weight and bulk and being able to get into virtually any tree he wanted. I had to be missing something, and I was determined to find out what.

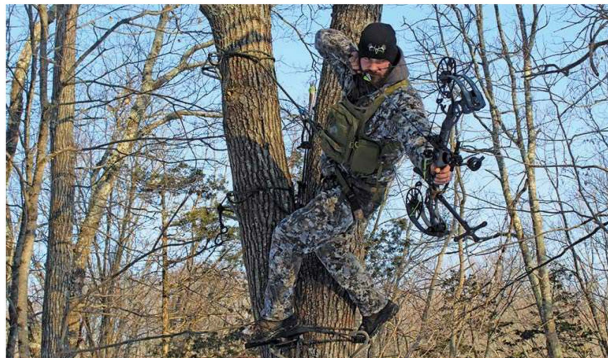
Saddles Past & Present

As I mentioned, saddle hunting is nothing new. Eberhart wrote in his book *Bowhunting Pressured Whitetails* that he'd been employing the method for around 18 years — and that was written in 2003! He'd purchased an Anderson Tree Sling off the rack at a hunting store in Michigan. No one there could tell him how to use the device he described as “seat belt straps sewn together to make a seat,” but he bought it anyway and set out to make it work. It offered no adjustments, and the bridge and tether, or “lead,” as Eberhart calls it, were all sewn together as one piece. But that early version showed great promise, as he greatly disliked the bulk, creakiness and weight of the treestands available at the time.

The Anderson Tree Sling was eventually acquired by a company called Big Bucks and remained relatively unchanged until the mid-90s. Trophyline entered the saddle market in the mid-80s and launched several saddles, including one Eberhart helped design with a mesh seat that became its most popular model. But when Trophyline's ownership focused on other business, the brand faded away some 10 years later, leaving aspiring saddle hunters to begin modifying gear meant for other purposes or to look beyond companies that just catered to hunters.

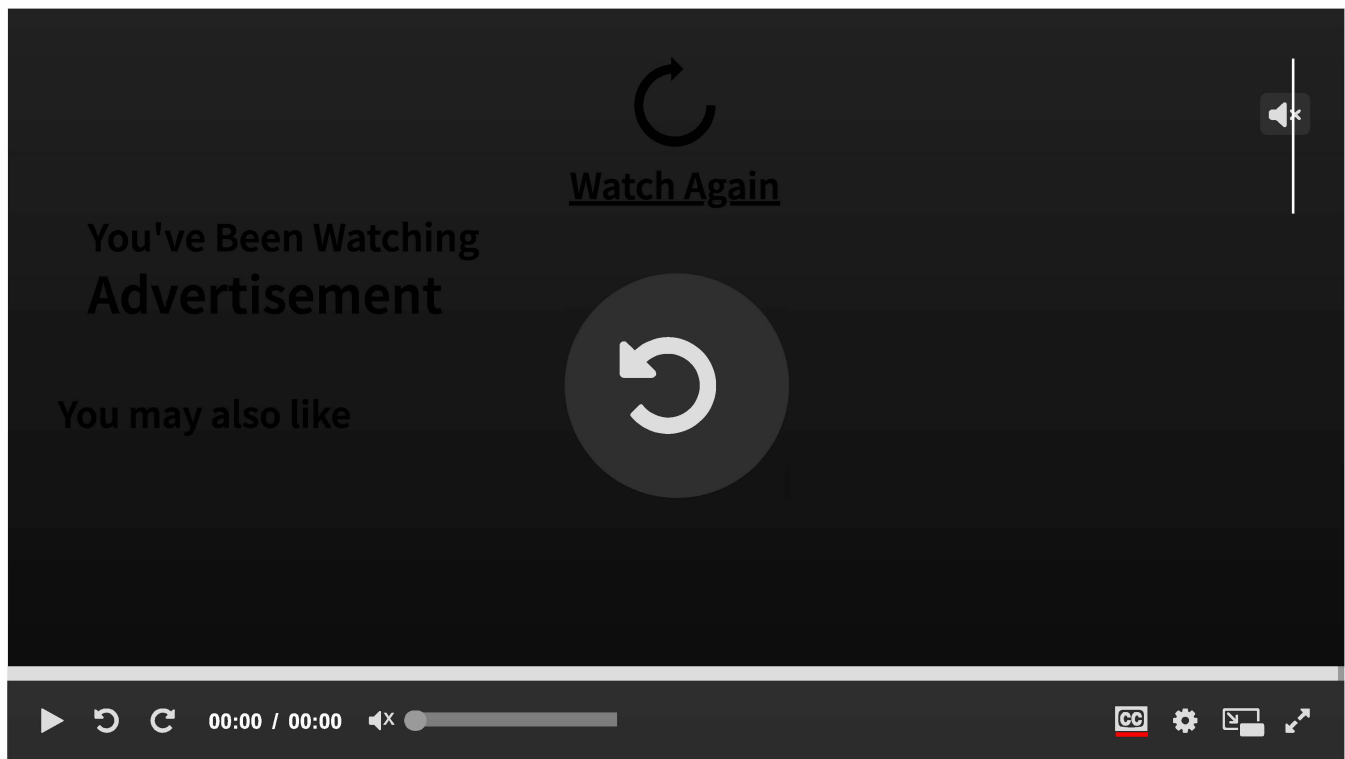
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New Tribe had been designing and building tree-climbing saddles for recreational climbers, working arborists and canopy researchers since 1984. After being approached by several hunters in 2013, co-founder and CEO Sophia Sparks decided to release a saddle developed for the hunting community — the [Aero Hunter](#). “Every year after that, with ongoing input from expert saddle hunters, we created improved Aero Hunter

models,” Sparks said. “The Kestrel and Kite are the finest of these so far, but it’s not the end of the line. We currently have another model in the works that could revolutionize saddle-hunting comfort.”



Aero Hunter Kestrel

Greg Godfrey and Ernie Powers, diehard saddle hunters who met via the online forum saddlehunter.com, had watched closely over the years as saddle hunters modified various products to suit their purposes. In 2018, they launched a new company called Tethrd with the goal of offering everything a saddle hunter needs in one place. “We were so tired of having to get on Craigslist, Ebay and other forums to buy gear and then rip it apart and make what we wanted,” Godfrey said. “We had no clue it was going to turn into a real business. Ernie and I were like, ‘Maybe we can sell, like, 200 of these things... so we’ll get some free gear and then maybe go on an elk trip next year.’”



Tethrd Mantis

After nervously placing the initial order for 200 Mantis saddles with their manufacturer, Tethrd launched its online store on June 1, 2018 and sold out within three days. The company has been working to keep pace with demand ever since.

Clearly, Scott and I weren't the only ones jumping on the saddle-hunting bandwagon. In fact, saddles and related accessories, such as high-end climbing sticks, are often on back order for several weeks or more. So, bowhunters looking to get in the saddle-hunting game are advised to plan accordingly.

Saddle-Hunting Basics

Saddle-hunting terminology can be quite confusing to someone just learning the proverbial ropes. The basics, however, are the same with any setup. The saddle is what cradles your posterior and supports your weight while you're in the tree. Typically, a saddle will have a pair of loops on either side: smaller loops for a lineman's belt and larger loops for the bridge. The bridge is usually a piece of climbing rope, Amsteel or heavy-duty nylon webbing on some DIY setups, and connects to the loops on each side of the hip, serving as the connection point to the tether.

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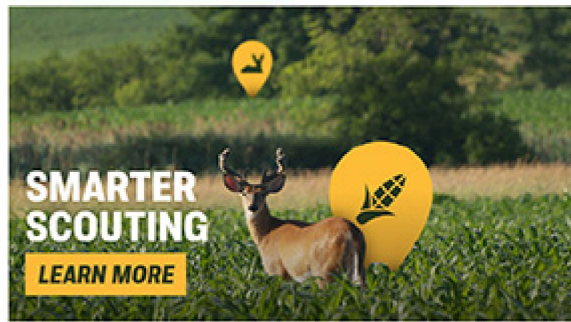
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Mike Del Rizzo Illustration

The tether is a length of rope with a loop at one end that's wrapped around the tree, usually about head height, and threaded through itself. A carabiner is affixed to the tether on either a Prusik knot or a commercially made ascender. The saddle hunter then hooks the bridge from his saddle into that carabiner. This allows the hunter to stay connected to the tree, and the bridge slides back and forth through the carabiner as the hunter turns from side to side. The tether is not any different than the tree ropes traditional treestand hunters use; the difference is that instead of hooking your treestand safety harness into the tether at the top of your shoulders and facing away from the tree, saddle hunters are facing the tree and their bridge clips into the tether at waist height.

A lineman's belt is used while going up and down the tree, no matter the climbing method used, which ranges from screw-in and strap-on steps to climbing sticks, modified rappelling techniques and climbing spurs. Once the desired height is reached, the hunter wraps the tether around the tree at head height, attaches the bridge to the tether and then backs off the pressure on the lineman's belt, eventually removing it altogether and, usually, storing it in an accessory pouch on the hip. This leaves the hunter facing the tree, typically leaning out with feet resting on either a small, lightweight platform or a ring of tree steps on nylon webbing that's ratcheted down to the tree trunk.

Saddle Safety

Sitting in fabric and hanging by ropes runs in stark contrast to being perched atop rigid metal stand platforms that are strapped tightly to a tree. This often causes people looking at saddle hunting for the first time to ask how safe such a system is. Both current manufacturers of tree saddles build their products to withstand more than 5,000 pounds of breaking strength, and most ropes used for lineman's belts, tethers and bridges are rated to at least 6,000 pounds.



Tree saddles are arguably as safe, or even safer, than traditional treestands because a saddle hunter is connected to the tree at all times — via a lineman's belt while climbing and via the tree tether while hunting.

“That was the safest thing the TMA (Treestand Manufacturer’s Association) ever tested,” said Eberhart, speaking of saddles. “They took a 275-pound log and tied it into a saddle, hooked it up to a tether and then pulled it up and allowed it to free fall six feet, and the

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Crüzr v. Tethrd

saddle stopped it. No treestand would ever stop a 275-pound log from a six-foot free fall.”

Godfrey points out that while surviving the test was impressive, that scenario wouldn't actually happen when saddle hunting. “Saddles are designed to prevent a fall, not catch a fall,” he said. “I'd a whole lot rather be in something that was designed to keep me from falling in the first place. So, there's a big difference.”

Add to that the fact that almost all treestand falls happen when the hunter is transitioning in or out of the stand. Saddle hunters stay connected to the tree the entire duration of going up and down the tree via a lineman's belt, because they need their hands free to use their climbing aids.

Saddle Comfort

So, tree saddles are safe — but are they comfortable? Minnesota bowhunter Chad Goethe believes switching to a saddle vastly extended the amount of time he is able to spend in a tree. “I'm 6 feet, 250 pounds and have had multiple back surgeries. Sitting in a conventional stand, I'm pushing it if I can get three hours,” he said. “All-day sits have been out of the question for about nine years. I got my Tethrd Mantis saddle and Predator platform combo toward the early part of the [2018] season and had multiple all-day sits — my average sit was around six hours. A saddle was the answer I was looking for.”

Andrew Walter is owner and president of Wild Edge Inc., maker of the SteppLadder climbing system that's a favorite among saddle hunters. An avid saddle hunter himself, Walter uses a saddle when demonstrating his climbing system at outdoor shows and says comfort is the first question he gets from observers. In response, Walter said he will take his saddle off and put it on the person asking about it. “They climb up the pole, and then they look at you and their whole demeanor changes,” he said.

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Saddle hunters can sit and rest when the hunting is slow, as author Greg Staggs demonstrates. Saddle hunters sit facing the tree, with their knees against the trunk. Knee pads help keep things comfortable.

Walter said it has gotten to the point where it's amusing. "Obviously, if it wasn't comfortable, I wouldn't be hunting out of it!"

Saddle Advantages

The recent spike in saddle hunting's popularity is not without good reason. No longer content to sit on a field edge or food plot day after day, today's serious bowhunters realize big bucks usually don't reach those destinations until well after dark on all but the most unpressured farms. Ambushing deer where they are — rather than being able to direct them to a certain location via carefully groomed food plots and pinch points — necessitates a style most have come to label as “mobile hunting.”

Combine that tactic with the growing interest in matching wits with their quarry on public land, and the owner of Wild Edge said you've got the makings of the perfect storm when explaining the sudden groundswell of saddle hunters. “It's the public-land thing, and it's mobile hunting,” Walter said. “Public-land hunting all of a sudden got to be wicked popular; it's almost like if you're hunting private land you're not cool anymore. I think it blew up and stemmed from that.”

Few folks know more about mobile hunting on public land than the young men who created *The Hunting Public* on YouTube. “Everybody in our group has kind of a different approach,” said Aaron Warbritton, one of the hosts of the popular channel, “but there's one key area where we find common ground, and that's mobile hunting. We're all about hunting a new spot, almost every day if we can.”

Sometimes referred to as “hang and hunt” or “running and gunning,” savvy bowhunters have come to realize deer pattern them just as quickly as they are able to pattern the deer — if not faster. That's why so many big bucks are taken the very first time an area is hunted. Godfrey sums it up in one simple statement: “First sit, best sit.” As bowhunters began going in deeper and moving around more, it was only natural that they began looking for ways to lighten their load.

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“We started thinking from just a weight perspective how much we were saving when we were taking a saddle and platform in versus a stand,” Warbritton explained. “Then when we started hunting out of the saddles and filming out of them, we realized we weren’t missing much — if anything at all — by using one of these things.” He said they haven’t completely ditched their arsenal of treestands, “but we’re certainly moving to hunting more out of our saddles in the future — especially if we end up packing in any distance.”

Tethrd’s Godfrey issues a caveat to aspiring saddle hunters, though: “It’s not as plug-and-play as treestand hunting; there is a learning curve,” referring to the time and effort it takes to become comfortable with the method as “getting in saddle shape.”

That said, you certainly don’t need to be a CrossFit champion to use a saddle. In fact, many saddle aficionados insist it requires far less effort to climb a tree using a saddle rig than it does to use a climbing treestand.

And, as Eberhart notes, investing the time and effort to get comfortable in a saddle is well worth it. “The advantages of a saddle over any kind of conventional treestand are night and day,” Eberhart said. “I can go into the season with 30-40 trees prepped for me to hunt, and there’s not a treestand in any of them. My saddle weighs about a pound and a half, rolls up to the size of a softball and fits into my backpack. I can hunt any tree, any time I want, and no one is going to steal my stand. And nobody’s going to hunt my spots when I’m not there.”

Eberhart said another big plus is being able to easily shoot 360 degrees around the tree, as well as being able to use the tree itself as a shield from deer, since saddle hunters set up on the back side of a tree. “Let’s say I’m hunting in a mast tree where deer are going to be lingering for 20 minutes or more,” he explained. “When you’re in a treestand, you have to be set up off to the side of the tree so you can make that shot. If you were 180 degrees on the back side of the tree, you can’t shoot through the tree. With a saddle, you can be on the back side of the tree, and when the shot opportunity comes, you just slightly swing to the side and take the shot.”

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The incredible weight difference between a saddle and treestand is probably the single biggest reason most people consider saddle hunting. Tethrd’s Mantis weighs roughly 1.2 pounds, with a bridge attached. Aero Hunter’s Kite comes in at roughly 1.75 pounds, while the Kestrel comes in at roughly 2.5 pounds, also with bridges attached. These saddles are so light, in fact, that your choice of lineman’s belt, tether, carabiners and ascenders can easily equal the weight of the saddle and bridge. Still, at well under 5 pounds combined, it pales in comparison to a hang-on or climbing treestand, which typically weigh anywhere from 15-25 pounds.

And even when accounting for climbing sticks or steps, foot platforms and other gear, experienced saddle hunters regularly walk into the woods and climb 20 feet off the ground with just 10-13 pounds of gear.

Saddles also eliminate another important element that probably saves more mature deer than anything else: the cringe-worthy clink of metal contacting metal. Since saddles are constructed of fabric, they never creak, pop or make other unwanted noises.

“If you took two hunters of equal skill and put them on the same property for five years, and one guy could use a saddle and the other guy had access to all the conventional stands he wanted from any manufacturer for free, the saddle hunter would kick the other guy’s butt,” Eberhart said. “It wouldn’t even be a contest; there’s that big of a difference.”

Saddling Up

I popped the hatch on my Jeep and reached in to grab my new tree saddle. After strapping it around my waist, I slung the tiny backpack carrying the small Tethrd Predator platform and a few assorted accessories on my back; even with the platform inside, it weighed less than six pounds. I hung a small bag of Wild Edge Stepps on my side, picked up my bow and started walking, thinking how weird this felt. Honestly, it was as though I already had a blind brushed in somewhere and I was merely walking to get in it — not as if I were carrying all the necessary gear to go 20 feet up a tree!

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I was doing what everyone in the saddle-hunting community said you shouldn’t do: The post office had delivered my saddle kit that morning. The first time I put it on had been in my living room to check for size and fit. Less than four hours later, here I was, strapping it

on for the second time at the rear of my vehicle. Read practically any thread on a saddle-hunting forum, and everyone will tell you to get lots of practice and gain confidence a foot or so off the ground before taking it out hunting.



Mike Del Rizzo Illustration

After reaching hunting height, I removed my tether from the military-style dump pouch affixed to the rear of my saddle using the MOLLE loops sewn onto the rear of the seat. Throwing it around the tree trunk at head height, I threaded its length back through the loop on the end, bringing with it the ascender and carabiner so it hung directly in front of my chest. I pulled the bridge that had been tucked into my belt up and out and placed it in the carabiner, taking the time to screw the gate shut after snapping it over the bridge. Ex. 1017
Cruz PV. Tethrd

was now connected to the tree twice — both with my lineman's belt and with my bridge tied into the tether above my head. I leaned back and slowly started loosening my lineman's belt, which allowed my weight to transfer to the tether. Once I could see the lineman's belt wasn't supporting me at all, I removed it and placed it in the same pouch that had just held my tether.

And that was it! I was officially saddle hunting. I shifted my weight from my left to my right, observing closely as my bridge slid through the carabiner with my movements. I turned around and looked directly behind me to my 6 o'clock position, or the "drop-shot position," as it's sometimes called. I had anticipated this being one of my tougher shots to get, but it was going to be an easy one. Continuing to experiment, I could see the "weak-side shot" presenting some challenges, and the "top shot" was going to require some bridge-length adjustment so it wouldn't interfere with my bowstring at full draw.

Was it going to take some time to fine-tune and feel completely comfortable with all the possible shot opportunities? Absolutely. On the other hand, the saddle itself was very comfortable — I sat (leaned, really) for nearly three hours my first night with absolutely no pain or discomfort. Since the "stand" and safety harness are integrated as one unit, it was incredibly nice after getting down out of the tree to simply unhook my lineman's belt, pick up my bow and start walking back to my vehicle. No sitting at the base of the tree packing up my stand and then slinging it over my back before being able to leave.

A month later, I was hanging in my saddle for probably the 20th time in a completely new tree as darkness began enveloping me. I caught movement just at the edge of my peripheral vision and turned to see a lone doe quietly making her way toward the nearby cut cornfield. I lifted my bow off its holder and rotated 180 degrees around, my bridge sliding effortlessly through the carabiner as I turned. Bracing my right foot on the trunk of the tree and leaning out, I eased my bow back to full draw before bleating the doe to a stop. The Rage Trypan sliced through her so cleanly she never knew what happened.

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I remained at full extension for a brief moment, drinking in the moment and congratulating myself for my small victory. Yes, she was the first victim out of my new saddle, but I knew there would be many more to come.

For more tips on saddle hunting, check out:

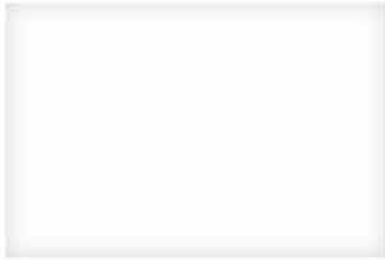
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