Bill Cochran: New organizations address tree stand hunting accidents

By Bill Cochran | Special to The Roanoke Times

Bob Boyd always has considered himself “the safest hunter in the woods.”

But last year, on opening day of the muzzleloading season, he broke one of his own rules, and it nearly cost him his life.

The seasoned Botetourt County sportsman fell while climbing into a 20-foot high permanent tree stand when a piece of weathered wood he was gripping broke loose. He suffered 10 broken ribs, three hairline fractures to his spine and a dislocated hip.

Boyd, who is in his mid-70s, spent two weeks in a medically induced coma, followed by three months in a rehabilitation center. He still has trouble sleeping when he recalls what happened that cold, early November day on land he owns in Montgomery County.

There are several permanent tree stands on Boyd’s property, which have given him the option to choose the one best suited for the day’s hunting conditions or where fresh deer sign has been spotted.

“I have a rule,” he said. “I check my stand three times; first, a month before the season, then a week before the season and then a day before the season.”

But on the eve of opening day, he discovered lots of deer activity near a stand he hadn’t checked, and in the pre-dawn darkness of the next day he was climbing into the structure.

“I didn’t follow my own plan,” he said.

First, Boyd carried his dirty bag up the stand, then his gun, and was settling in when he remembered he hadn’t covered his ATV with a camouflage tarp. So he climbed down to take care of that.

On the way back up, a pull-up board he was gripping gave way. He doesn’t remember how long he was unconscious, but he does vividly recall the excruciating pain when he forced himself to roll onto his side in order to retrieve his two-way radio so he could contact his hunting buddy and best friend, Jim Lynch.

This past season in Virginia, there were 38 reported hunting mishaps, 15 of them involving tree stands — two of those fatal. In many states, tree-stand mishaps are the leading cause of serious hunting accidents and fatalities.

“I like to think that we have kept the number of incidents low because we started early with tree stand safety in all of the hunter-education courses,” said Lee Walker, Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Outreach Director.

August has been designated “Tree Stand Safety Awareness Month” by a new Roanoke-based, national organization
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