

# Tree Stands on State Lands

*From the looks of our woods, there are a lot of hunters who don't understand the responsibilities that come with placing tree stands afield. Join us as we examine what you can and can't do on state park, forest and game lands.*

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**M**ORE hunters than ever seem to be going up trees these days. They use climbing tree stands, hang-on tree stands, ladder stands and some construct their own. But there seems to be some confusion among hunters about how, where and when tree stands can be used—and left—on state-owned lands.

For the record, tree stands cannot be left permanently on state game lands, state forests or state parks. The regulations for all these lands are similar, because state forests and state parks generally mirror Game Commission regulations to help protect and manage their properties. Game Commission regulations stipulate that tree stands may be placed on state game lands only up to two weeks before the opening of the first big-game season and must be removed within two weeks of the close of the last day of the final big-game season in the Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) where they're located.

For most Pennsylvanians, tree stands may be put up within two weeks of the start of deer archery season and must be removed within two weeks of the close of late flintlock season on all state game, forest and park lands. The exception would be in WMUs 2B, 5C and 5D, where deer seasons start in late September and run into late January.

Owners of tree stands found on state

game lands outside these established use periods risk having their tree stands confiscated by Game Commission land managers or law enforcement officers. When tree stands are confiscated on state game lands, a note is left informing the tree-stand owner his or her stand has been confiscated and that it may be collected at the agency's region office serving that county. As a rule, hunters looking to reclaim their property face a fine ranging from \$75 to \$200, depending upon damages the tree stand may have caused to the tree to which it was attached. The fine for leaving tree stands on state parks and state forests ranges from \$25 to \$300, plus costs.

Game Commission region offices do not hold onto tree stands for prolonged periods. Tree stands cannot be resold. If no one claims a tree stand within a reasonable amount of time, the stand will be discarded. The policy for state parks and state forests is different.

The Game Commission and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' bureaus of State Parks and Forestry are interested in receiving information on tree stands that appear to be abandoned or left outside the use periods on their appropriate state lands. Information on tree stands left behind on game lands can be called into the region office serving that county in which the game lands is located, or via email through [pgccomments@pa.gov](mailto:pgccomments@pa.gov). Stands left on state parks or forests may be reported to park or forest district offices.

Although tree stands may be left on state lands during the defined use periods during deer and bear season, their security is not guaranteed by the Game Commission or DCNR. Hunters

WHEN the late archery and flintlock muzzleloader deer seasons come to a close in late January, the clock will start on a two-week period to remove all tree stands from public lands. Tree stands left out beyond the deadline are subject to confiscation, and while their owners often are able to reclaim the stands, they might also be fined for violations.

leave tree stands on state lands assuming all risks. There is no regulation or law that guarantees you the location in which you've placed your tree stand. Someone can come along and take down your stand and use the tree for his or her tree stand. The Game Commission does not investigate tree stand vandalism or theft on state game lands. Both crimes would have to be investigated by Pennsylvania State Police, which likely will not visit the scene, but will file a report on the theft or vandalism of a tree stand. DCNR rangers investigate all thefts on state parks and state forests.

In essence, when you leave a tree stand—or a ground blind or trail camera—anywhere on state lands, you have assumed all risks for leaving your property there. If your tree stand is taken or vandalized, you most likely will not catch the person who took or damaged your property unless, of course, someone saw the individual(s) carrying the stand away, or a strategically placed trail camera snapped an image of the crime in progress.

When you walk away from your property in the woods of Pennsylvania—unless you're on private land you own or have permission to use—you're leaving it unattended. That comes with substantial risk in some areas. By and large, most hunters are law-abiding folks who won't bother your tree stand. But if you're setting up your ladder stand or hang-on stand in new territo-

ry—a location someone else has been using for years—there’s a chance the hunter(s) already using the area won’t appreciate your unattended claim to it, especially if your stand interferes with their use of the area.

If someone bothers you while you’re in the act of hunting, that can be construed as hunter harassment. But if someone uses the tree next to your tree stand, or disassembles the stand and uses the tree it was attached to before you get to the location, that’s the law of the woods, first come, first served. If you harass that hunter while he or she hunts, you’re actually in violation of the law. In fact, although it might not be ethical, another hunter may legally use your tree stand on state land if he or she climbs into it before you do on the day you plan to hunt.

Given the related problems associated with leaving a tree stand on state lands, it becomes obvious that the risk of loss or problems is greater than some realize. Couple that with the problem of abandonment of tree stands on state lands, and it becomes clear that tree-stand concerns have become more prevalent.

Both agencies would prefer hunters leave public lands with what they brought with them daily. But it’s understood that not everyone who hunts is comfortable using a climbing tree stand, or physically capable of carrying in a tree stand or ladder stand daily. That’s why the tree stand exception is in place. But a growing number of

hunters leave behind hang-on and ladder stands on state lands after the close of hunting seasons and they’re damaging trees—the trunk is forced to grow over tightened cables and straps – and interfering with forest management operations. Thousands of tree stands are left unattended on state lands and hundreds are being confiscated annually. It’s a trend that needs to be reversed.



Constructed tree stands — nailed or screwed into living trees—on state lands also continue to be a problem. These stands are an eyesore in the woods, often cause irreversible damage to trees and have been illegal for years. If caught using or building a tree stand that has been nailed or screwed to living trees — regardless of whether you built it—you are in violation of the law and may be

subject to a fine. You may use a tree stand that is lashed to a living tree, but again, you need to remove it or disassemble it at the conclusion of season, and if someone beats you to the location, it’s a first-come, first-served situation.

Penn’s Woods is a big place and there’s room for all of us to hunt. So if you hunt state lands, use tree stands legally and responsibly. Report illegally constructed tree stands—as you would salt and mineral blocks—and stands left behind or abandoned. Every time one of us does, hunting gets better for everyone. 🍂