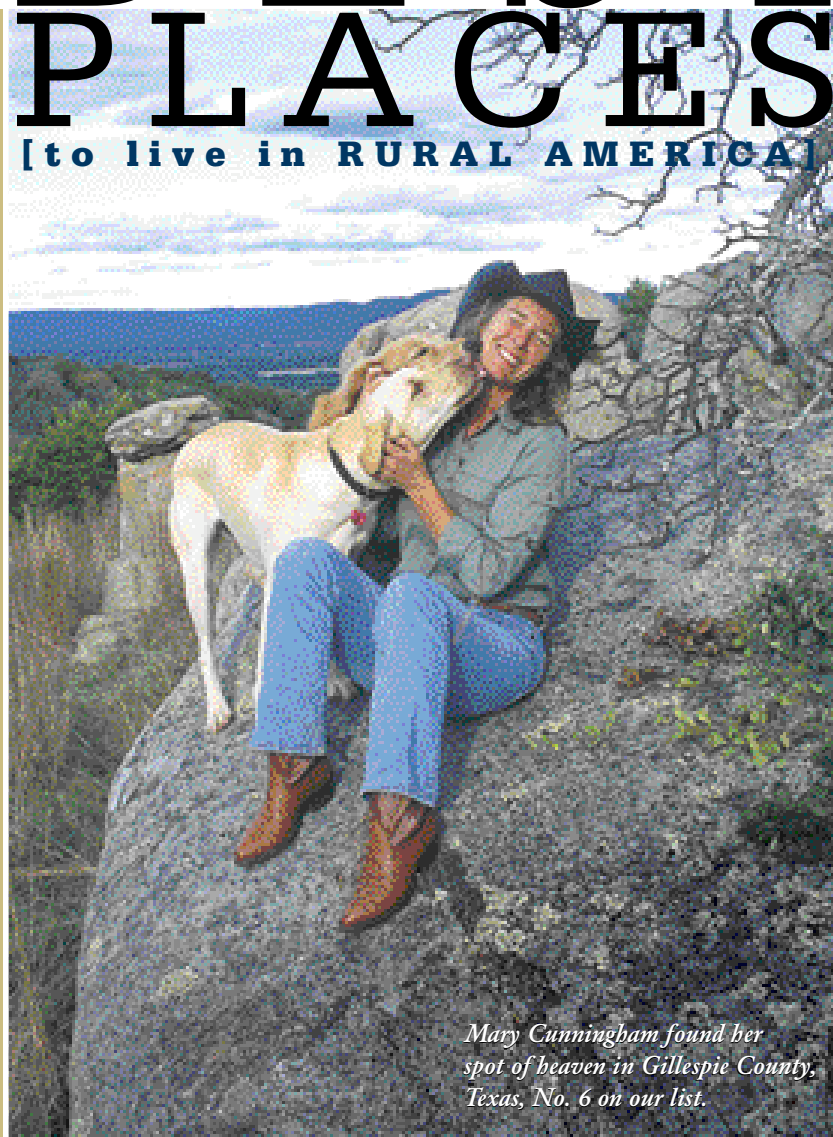


# BEST PLACES

[to live in RURAL AMERICA]



*Mary Cunningham found her spot of heaven in Gillespie County, Texas, No. 6 on our list.*

PHOTO: KARL WOLFSHOHL

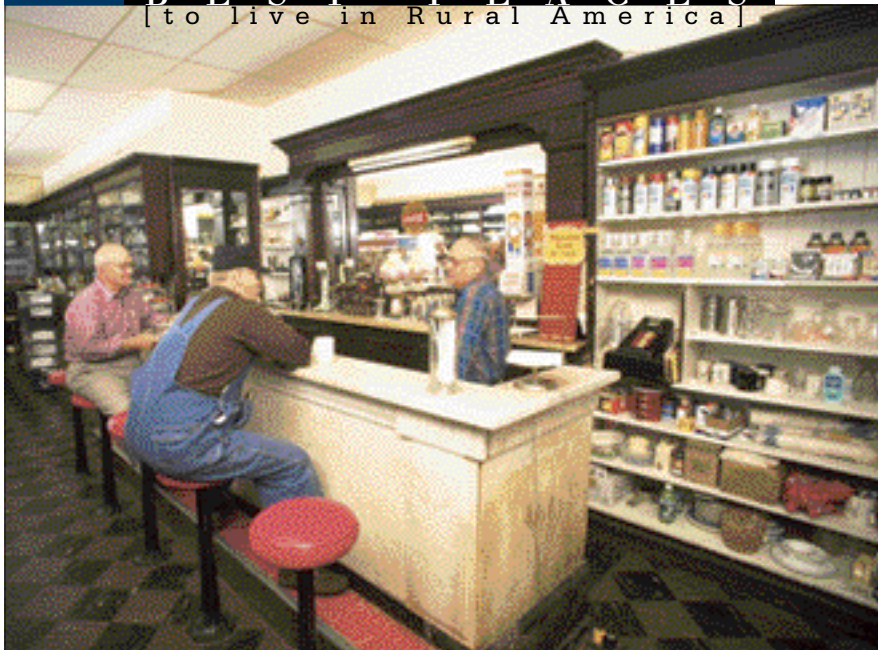
**P**rogressive Farmer editors have traveled all over rural America. Chances are, we've been to your county at some time or another, and we have to say they're all great places to live. But we decided to do something really difficult—find the best of the best. We poured over lots of statistics for this story, looking at the many things we all desire. Quality schools. Low crime. Good health care. Clean air and water. We also looked for counties that have access to large cities for culture and shopping, but are still rural with plenty of elbow room. Desirability is in the eye of the beholder, yet we think our top 10 counties would rank high on nearly anyone's list.

**TURN PAGE AND OPEN FLAP TO BEGIN**

BY KARL WOLFSHOHL AND JAMIE COLE

# BEST PLACES

[to live in Rural America]



# 1

## Fauquier County, Virginia

"Rural, proud of it and trying to stay that way" could be the unofficial motto of this county lying 45 minutes west of Washington, D.C. Rimmed on the north by the Blue Ridge and then tapering to flat, fertile farm fields in the south, Fauquier County has something to suit almost everyone's tastes. Wineries are popping up in the foothills, while those southern fields are still fertile with beef and milk cows, corn, and hay. Former urbanites, tired of the grind, are pouring in like a cold winter rain. With equestrian activities around every bend, no wonder Fauquier is attractive. The Upperville Colt and Horse Show is one of the oldest in the U.S. There's a 50-acre minimum subdivision size with the goal of keeping some rural character, so that's the size of many farms. Estates with names such as Mellon and Marriott abound.

**Lots To Do:** See antique biplanes at the Flying Circus Air Show, or visit one of about 10 wineries and 12 bed and breakfast inns.

**Land Prices:** If you're lucky, you may find land zoned for ag at \$3,500 per acre. Parcels zoned for housing are \$30,000 per acre and up.



### At a Glance

COUNTY SEAT: Warrenton

POPULATION: 62,992

POPULATION DENSITY: 85/sq. mi.

AVERAGE INCOME: \$67,237

STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO: 11.8:1

LOW CRIME: ★★☆☆

LOW POLLUTION: ★★★★★

HEALTH CARE: ★★☆☆

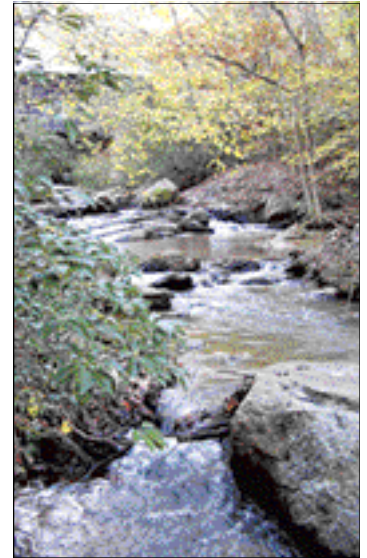
TAX BURDEN: ★★★★★



*Clockwise from top: (1) Regulars hang out at an old-fashioned soda fountain in Remington. (2) Chris Pearmund set up his own Pearmund Cellars in Fauquier County two years ago after making wine for other owners. (3) Lovely country homes on acreage are a common sight in Fauquier County. (4) Upscale equestrian activities, such as the Gold Cup Steeplechase, make the county a haven for horse lovers. PHOTOS: VIRGINIA TOURISM CORP. / CHRIS PEARMUND / KARL WOLFSHOHL / DON NORMARK*



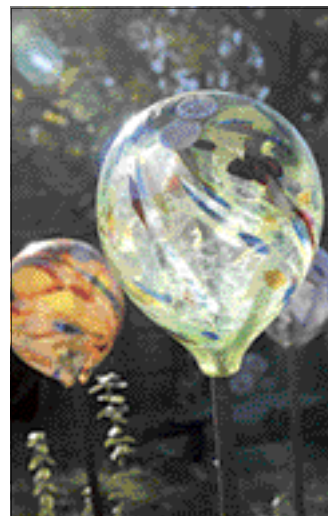
# 2 Oconee County, Georgia



A transitional county that retains its rural flavor, Oconee has been discovered as a great place to live by people just across the river at Athens, home of the University of Georgia. Residents also commute to Atlanta, which is only an hour's drive away when traffic is light. And a lot of folks have forgotten the city entirely, choosing to work from home. Traditional ag is still present in the form of beef cattle and pine forests, and Oconee County boasts some of the strongest 4-H and FFA programs for kids anywhere. Subdivisions and demand for small places in the country have driven land prices and housing through the roof. The schools? Excellent. SAT scores are Georgia's best.

**Artsy Crowd:** Want pottery and fine silver? This is the place for it. An emerging arts community thrives here.

**Land Prices:** They range from \$8,000 or \$9,000 per acre in less developed sections to \$20,000 and up where there's more immediate development potential.



*Clockwise from top: (1) Small, 8- to 10-acre farms dot the landscape. (2) Rose Creek runs underneath Elder's Mill covered bridge. (3) Allen (far left) and Ann Powers (far right) enjoy a sunset with visiting family on the front porch on their farm in Oconee County. (4) Loretta Eby's glasswork is an attraction at Happy Valley Pottery, part of the county's burgeoning arts community.* PHOTOS: JAMIE COLE

## At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Watkinsville

**POPULATION:** 28,647

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 141/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:** \$59,307

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO:** 12.7:1

**LOW CRIME:**

★★★★

**LOW POLLUTION:**

★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:**

★★☆☆

**TAX BURDEN:**

★★★★







# McPherson County, Kansas



*Clockwise from top: (1) Low crime and a small-town feel mean a safer walk to school for McPherson's kids. (2) Lindsborg is right in the center of town. (3) Rural homes and open spaces characterize McPherson County.* PHOTOS: JIM PATRICO

First things first — pronounce it correctly. It's mac-FUR-son, and any resident will tell you: "There's no FEAR in McPherson." But there's plenty to be proud of here. Main Street in the county seat offers quite a set piece: the McPherson Opera House (pictured below right). Built in 1888, the 900-seat, acoustically perfect auditorium is currently under renovation and gearing up to be a showplace for the arts. McPherson's Main Street thrives with niche businesses.

Lindsborg, or "Little Sweden," offers heartland hospitality with a Scandinavian flavor. The county also has a renowned arts community and puts on an annual Messiah Festival at Easter that features an acclaimed



performance of the G.F. Handel classic. Agriculture continues to be a priority; the McPherson chamber holds a Rural Appreciation supper every year hosting more than 800 local farmers. Excellent schools and two private liberal arts colleges serve the county.

**Car School:** McPherson College offers the world's only four-year accredited degree in auto restoration. Students restore antique and special-interest vehicles.

**Land Prices:** It's a bargain compared to some on our list. Lots from 3 to 40 acres range from \$1,500 to \$4,000 an acre; dry land starts at \$750 an acre; irrigated land starts at \$1,500 an acre; and pastureland starts at \$500 an acre.

## At a Glance

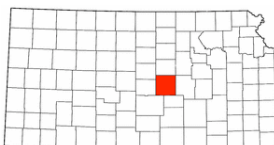
**COUNTY SEAT:** McPherson

**POPULATION:** 29,265

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 33/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:** \$43,690

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO:** 10.8:1



**LOW CRIME:** ★★★★★ **LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:** ★★★☆☆ **TAX BURDEN:** ★★★☆☆



Fulton's quaint streets include beautiful Victorian-style homes. This one, owned by Cathy and Carl McGeorge, was converted to a bed and breakfast. Their first customer: former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. PHOTOS: JIM PATRICO

## At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Fulton

**POPULATION:** 42,657

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 49/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:** \$41,806

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO:** 11.4:1

**LOW CRIME:** ★★★★★

**LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:** ★★☆☆

**TAX BURDEN:** ★★★☆



Located almost in the middle of the U.S., Callaway County is a special place, as any Callawegian (that's what a native calls himself) will tell you. The land is scenic, from the fertile plains in the north to the rolling hills and bluffs bordering the Missouri River at the southern border. Jefferson City, the state capital, is just on the other side of the river. And a few miles to the west is Columbia, where the main campus for the University of Missouri sits. For big cities, take your pick: St. Louis and Kansas City are both nearby. Callaway County can boast of a low crime rate, good school systems and a low cost of living. Though it's growing fast, the county has kept its warm, rural charm.

**History:** During the Civil War, the county declared itself a sovereign state ("The Kingdom of Callaway") after facing down and fooling Union troops with logs painted black to resemble cannons. In 1946, Winston Churchill gave his historic Iron Curtain Speech at Westminster College in Fulton. The Winston Churchill Memorial (right) in a rebuilt 1677 church from England is a town treasure.

**Land Prices:** They range from \$1,000 per acre for large parcels to \$2,500 per acre for smaller, prime properties on paved roads.



# 4 Callaway County, Missouri







Cardboard races are an annual event at Grafton's Loon Mountain Ski Resort.

## Grafton County, New Hampshire

Though geographically large (it's twice the size, for instance, of Callaway County, Mo.), Grafton County is dominated by the White Mountain National Forest. So development isn't an issue. Lebanon, in the southwest corner of the county, ranked No. 3 in Norman Crampton's "The 100 Best Small Towns in America." The National Trust for Historic Preservation named another town, Littleton, as one of its five Great American Main Street communities in 2003. The schools are topnotch; Grafton County is home to the Ivy League's Dartmouth College. Skiing is quite the tourist draw for Northeast metro areas. In spite of this, the largest city still has fewer than 15,000 residents. The Old Man of the Mountain, a facelike rock formation on Cannon Mountain, was featured on New Hampshire's state quarter in 2000. The famous stone face collapsed in 2003.

### At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Woodsville

**POPULATION:** 84,766

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 49/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:**  
\$45,241

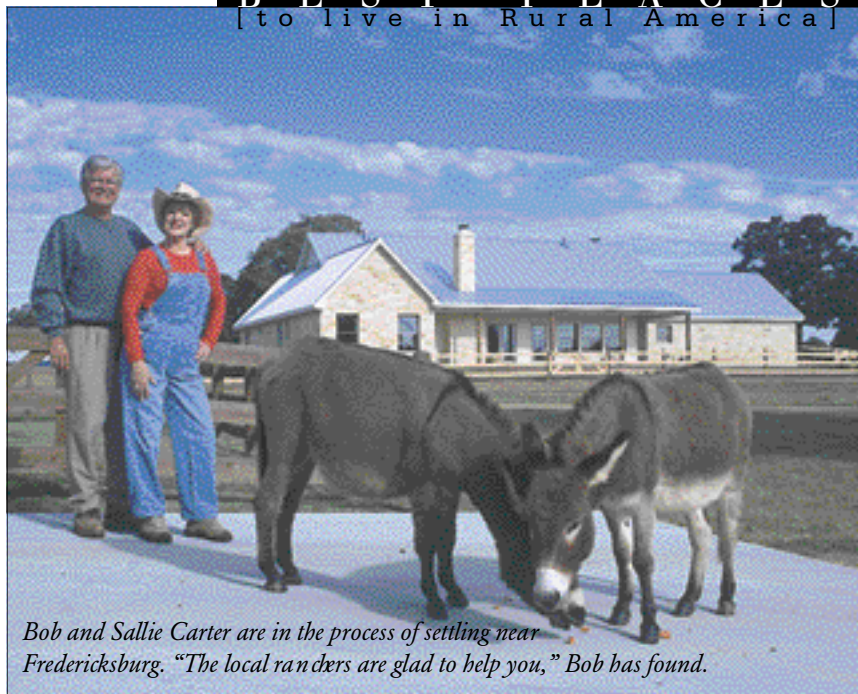
**STUDENT/TEACHER  
RATIO:** 12.8:1

**LOW CRIME:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:** ★★★★★

**LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**TAX BURDEN:** ★★★★★



## 6 Gillespie County, Texas

Scenic granite hills to the north and fertile pastures to the south, all dotted with oak and cedar, give nearly anyone with a rural bent something to love. An influx of newcomers—many of them retired from successful careers—alongside oldtime ranching families creates an interesting contrast. Schools are absolutely top quality. Gillespie County is home to Luckenbach, of Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings fame. But the cultural beauty here goes much deeper. German heritage is everywhere you look on Main Street in

Fredericksburg, right along with art galleries, antique shops and even an in-town winery. It's only an hour from San Antonio and just over that to Austin.

**Land Prices:** A mountainous 200-acre ranch with no facilities recently went on the market for \$3,500 per acre.

### Creature Comforts:

Roughly 60 restaurants serve fair to fine cuisine in and around Fredericksburg. About 100 physicians work in or around the modern medical center.



Fredericksburg is a big draw for tourists. Here Baden Fleming of Eden, Texas, enjoys a town attraction. PHOTOS: KARL WOLFSHOHL

### At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Fredericksburg

**POPULATION:** 22,660

**POPULATION DENSITY:**  
21/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:**  
\$40,950

**STUDENT/TEACHER  
RATIO:** 12.2:1

**LOW CRIME:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:** ★★☆☆☆

**LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**TAX BURDEN:** ★★★★★





# 7 Sauk County,



*Sauk County is filled with lovely vistas. Dick and Jane Dana of New Freedom enjoy the view from their century-old barn.*

## Wisconsin

A surprise waits around every bend in the road and over every crest of the hill in this lovely county. Topographically, it is like a piece of cloth someone wadded into a ball then let drop to the floor. When it landed it had wrinkles: ridges and valleys, bluffs and bottomlands. No wonder the father of all naturalists, Aldo Leopold, was inspired to write “A Sand County Almanac” while living in a converted chicken coop here in Fairfield Township. In addition to dairying and other traditional ag, the county exerts a strong pull on conservation-minded people even today. The Nature Conservancy designated the Baraboo Bluffs region as one of its “Last Great Places” by virtue of unique rocks, plants and animals. Everywhere the county is an outdoor paradise with bike trails, hiking, skiing, snowmobile trails and lots of hunting. Yet the small towns here are mostly thriving, driven by a dairy economy. You’ll also find herb and vegetable farms, organic potatoes and little towns so quaint they will tug at your heart.

**Nature:** Parfrey’s Glen Natural Area, part of Devil’s Lake State Park, has rock formations and a glacial lake that make it one of the continent’s most beautiful spots. All of the dams have been removed from the Baraboo River in the last few years, making it the longest free-flowing river in the U.S.

**Land Prices:** Average prices are \$2,500 to \$3,000 per acre—and going up. You might find acreage in the western part of the county for \$1,800 to \$2,000 per acre. But on the edge of municipal areas, prices can be as high as \$30,000 per acre.

### At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Baraboo

**POPULATION:** 56,794

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 67/sq. mi.

**AVERAGE INCOME:** \$45,277

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO:** 11.8:1

**LOW CRIME:**

★★★★

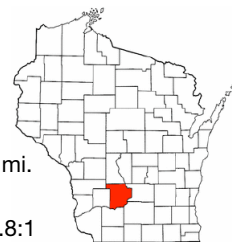
**LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:**

★★★☆☆

**TAX BURDEN:**

★★★☆☆



*Baraboo just bursts with 19th century charm.*

PHOTOS: JIM PATRICO





# 8 Wilson County, Tennessee

The eastern neighbor of sprawling Davidson County (Nashville), Wilson County retains much of its good farmland but with subdivisions and small farms playing a more prominent role now. You'll see plenty of cattle and hay in the county. Small goat and sheep flocks abound, as you would expect with so many small farms. Two major highways pass through the county, making commuting to work easy. It's also attractive to industry: Dell Computer, Bridgestone and Cracker Barrel all have major installations here. Families are moving in because the schools are so good.



*A statue of Confederate Gen. Robert Hopkins Hatton (left) stands in the center of Lebanon. Above, schoolchildren take down the flag at Watertown Elementary School. PHOTOS: JOE LINK*

**Land Prices:** They're all over the map, with highs of \$8,000 to \$10,000 an acre on the Nashville side while land farther east goes for \$2,500 to \$3,000.

**Fair Attraction:** The Wilson County Fair draws about 420,000 people through nine days each year, starting the third week of August.

## At a Glance

**COUNTY SEAT:** Lebanon

**POPULATION:** 56,794

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 67/sq. mi.

**LOW CRIME:** ★★★★★

**HEALTH CARE:** ★★★☆



**AVERAGE INCOME:** \$45,277

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO:** 11.8:1

**LOW POLLUTION:** ★★★★★

**TAX BURDEN:** ★★★☆



# 9 Eagle County, Colorado



*The fly-fishing is great on Eagle's Piney River.* PHOTO: AP/WORLDWIDE

Rocky Mountain peaks, ski resorts including Vail and secluded scenic valleys have made Eagle more of a playground for the rich and famous than an agricultural stronghold. Ranches are being sold for golf courses, but some longtime families are comfortable here and don't plan on going anywhere. "My dad and I started from scratch when we leased land in 1947 and 1948," says Ben Wurtsmith, 71, of Burns, Colo. "We finally put together a 400-cow outfit that's now run by my son, daughter and grandson. I don't think my family would sell this ranch. We like this way of life, and right now we seem to be the keepers of the land."

**Land Prices:** Around here, if you have to ask you probably can't afford any. The state legislature decreed long ago that ranches could not be divided into parcels smaller than 35 acres. In Eagle County, parcels go from \$500,000 to a couple of million.

## At a Glance

COUNTY SEAT: Eagle  
POPULATION: 47,366  
POP. DENSITY: 28/sq. mi.  
LOW CRIME: ★★★★★  
HEALTH CARE: ★★★★★  
LOW POLLUTION: ★★★★★  
TAX BURDEN: ★★★★★

AVERAGE INCOME: \$68,964  
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO: 12.4:1





# 10 Rankin County, Mississippi

Rankin County, which lies just across the Pearl River from state capital Jackson, is growing quickly. Still, it manages to maintain its rural flavor. Generations of farmers have kept agriculture in the forefront in the eastern part of the county. In the west, towns have grown but still maintain a small-town feel. Growth is mainly retail, not industrial. Schools are a big draw to Rankin; the county boasts the state's top public and private schools. Three major hospitals are state-of-the-art and a source of pride for residents; Woman's Hospital in Flowood features world-class birthing suites. When we compiled our stats, Rankin County's health-care index was higher than any rural county's in the nation. And it's fun there, too. The Barnett Reservoir on the Pearl River (above) is a popular spot for all kinds of water recreation, and Brandon boasts excellent family athletic facilities.

**It's a Home Run:** Rankin County hits one out of the park for baseball fans. The Atlanta Braves AA team moves from Greenville to Rankin County next year, where they'll play in a new \$20 million stadium in Pearl.

**Land Prices:** They run \$7,000 to \$8,000 per acre, and they're less as you move east away from Jackson.



*Brandon's soccer fields become Healing Fields each year in September. Residents place one flag in the ground for each life lost on 9/11 and in the war in Iraq.*

## At a Glance

COUNTY SEAT: Brandon

POPULATION: 127,528

POPULATION DENSITY: 158/sq. mi.

AVERAGE INCOME: \$48,380

STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO: 16.3:1

LOW CRIME: ★★★★★

LOW POLLUTION: ★★★★★

HEALTH CARE: ★★★★★

TAX BURDEN: ★★★☆





## BEST of the rest

Regional top 10 lists

	SOUTH	INCOME	POPULATION	LOW CRIME	HEALTH CARE	AIR QUALITY	TAX BURDEN	COMMENT
1	Fauquier Co., Va.	\$67,237	62,992	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Our overall No. 1</i>
2	Oconee Co., Ga.	\$59,307	28,647	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Working to stay rural</i>
3	Wilson Co., Tenn.	\$45,277	56,794	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Lowest crime rate on our list</i>
4	Rankin Co., Miss.	\$48,380	127,528	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Tops in the country in health care</i>
5	Hanover Co., Va.	\$63,665	96,438	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Home of the Hanover tomato variety</i>
6	Gloucester Co., Va.	\$48,906	37,303	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Rich in Colonial history</i>
7	Beaufort Co., S.C.	\$51,625	136,525	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Growing fast on the coast</i>
8	Augusta Co., Va.	\$46,671	67,974	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Near Augusta but still has countryside</i>
9	Forsyth Co., Ga.	\$74,231	131,575	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Just north of Atlanta</i>
10	Columbia Co., Ga.	\$59,729	100,062	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Ranked No. 1 in air quality</i>
	SOUTHWEST	INCOME	POPULATION	LOW CRIME	HEALTH CARE	AIR QUALITY	TAX BURDEN	COMMENT
1	Gillespie Co., Texas	\$40,950	22,660	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	<i>Rural with a German heritage</i>
2	Santa Fe Co., N.M.	\$45,521	138,622	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	<i>Metro center with rural surroundings</i>
3	Canadian Co., Okla.	\$49,068	94,470	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Home of Grazing Lands Research Lab</i>
4	Rogers Co., Okla.	\$48,047	79,136	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Rich in Native American history</i>
5	Chambers Co., Texas	\$51,858	28,050	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Ag-heavy but close to Houston</i>
6	Bastrop Co., Texas	\$47,562	69,998	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Good fishing on Lake Bastrop</i>
7	Wise Co., Texas	\$46,269	56,141	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	<i>Close to Fort Worth with nice lakes</i>
8	Kaufman Co., Texas	\$48,150	85,224	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Growing county near Dallas</i>
9	Coconino Co., Ariz.	\$41,597	122,854	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Includes Sedona and lots of open space</i>
10	Hays Co., Texas	\$48,419	119,256	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Well-known caves attract tourists</i>
	MIDWEST	INCOME	POPULATION	LOW CRIME	HEALTH CARE	AIR QUALITY	TAX BURDEN	COMMENT
1	McPherson Co., Kan.	\$43,690	29,265	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Land prices still a bargain</i>
2	Callaway Co., Mo.	\$41,806	42,657	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Was once its own state</i>
3	Sauk Co., Wis.	\$45,277	56,794	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	<i>Home of Circus World Museum</i>
4	Union Co., S.D.	\$48,624	13,166	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Southernmost county in state</i>
5	Dodge Co., Wis.	\$48,760	87,482	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>300 miles of groomed snowmobile trails</i>
6	Ozaukee Co., Wis.	\$67,978	85,508	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Ozaukee Interurban Trail is unique</i>
7	Livingston Co., Ill.	\$44,304	39,061	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>County seat Pontiac is great small town</i>
8	Iowa Co., Wis.	\$45,728	23,447	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>County has excellent small airport</i>
9	Washington Co., Wis.	\$61,116	123,666	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Has its own semi-pro symphony</i>
10	Fond du Lac Co., Wis.	\$48,841	97,983	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Park and trail system for nature lovers</i>
	WEST	INCOME	POPULATION	LOW CRIME	HEALTH CARE	AIR QUALITY	TAX BURDEN	COMMENT
1	Eagle Co., Colo.	\$68,964	47,366	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	<i>Rural playground for the wealthy</i>
2	Garfield Co., Colo.	\$50,638	48,740	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Prides itself as a sportsman's paradise</i>
3	Elbert Co., Colo.	\$68,022	22,964	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Near Denver; lots of ranches and farms</i>
4	Gallatin Co., Mont.	\$41,117	74,887	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Home to part of Yellowstone Nat'l Park</i>
5	Napa Co., Calif.	\$55,654	133,946	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Heart of wine country</i>
6	Churchill Co., Nev.	\$44,430	25,027	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Rural with short drive to Reno</i>
7	Amador Co., Calif.	\$46,048	37,967	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Meticulously preserved history</i>
8	Campbell Co., Wyo.	\$52,925	36,992	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Produces 30% of the nation's coal</i>
9	Douglas Co., Nev.	\$56,493	44,993	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Mountainous with parts of Lake Tahoe</i>
10	Mendocino Co., Calif.	\$38,694	89,009	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Coastal with a national forest</i>
	NORTHEAST	INCOME	POPULATION	LOW CRIME	HEALTH CARE	AIR QUALITY	TAX BURDEN	COMMENT
1	Grafton Co., N.H.	\$45,241	84,766	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>No. 1 in country based solely on stats</i>
2	Berkshire Co., Mass.	\$42,111	132,813	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Great for skiing and theater</i>
3	Ontario Co., N.Y.	\$48,246	103,127	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Heart of Finger Lake country</i>
4	Madison Co., N.Y.	\$43,199	70,428	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Half of land in county is farmland</i>
5	Hampshire Co., Mass.	\$49,663	155,980	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Home to Mount Holyoke College</i>
6	Tolland Co., Conn.	\$63,714	147,747	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Rural respite from Hartford metro</i>
7	Windham Co., Conn.	\$48,653	113,767	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>No incorporated cities</i>
8	Windsor Co., Vt.	\$43,712	58,026	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>Home of Billings Farm and Museum</i>
9	Belknap Co., N.H.	\$47,002	61,617	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★★	<i>Home of Lake Winnepesaukee</i>
10	Pike Co., Penn.	\$48,239	54,000	★★★★	★★★☆☆	★★★★	★★★☆☆	<i>In the middle of the Poconos</i>

# How We Did It

*Here's the scoop on how we compiled our list.*

There has never been a list like our “Best Places To Live in Rural America,” so when we decided to tackle this project we had to blaze our own trail. Rural counties have never been ranked this way before. But our sister Time Inc. publication, *Money* magazine, is famous for its annual Best Places issue that ranks cities. So we used



*Wilson County, Tenn., is No. 8 on our list.* PHOTO: JOE LINK

the same statistical research group, OnBoard LLC, that *Money* uses.

We started with 600 counties with rural areas that met our population, population density and income criteria. Then we ranked them by health care (the number of hospitals and clinics in the county); education (student/teacher ratio and number of higher learning institutions); climate (average temperature and rainfall); pollution index (ranked against the national average); crime index (personal and property crime ranked against the national average); and tax burden (county sales tax and state income tax only, since property taxes vary too widely between municipalities). In each category, we used OnBoard's most recent stats.

After crunching the numbers, our editorial board looked at the intangibles, such as quality of life, leisure and cultural pursuits, and scenery. Our well-traveled staff made selections that stayed true to the numbers but also reflected our subjective opinions about the counties chosen. We also talked to residents in these counties; numbers can tell us a great deal about a place, but not as much as the people who live there.

Editors Karl Wolfshohl and Jamie Cole put the section together after months of research and travel. Executive Editor Joe Link and Senior Editor Jim Patrico traveled to some of our top 10 counties and came back with reports and photos. The “Best of the Rest” list combines our editors' favorites with OnBoard statistics for a look at the best in each region of the country.

For our charts, some key statistics are rated in each county from one star to four stars. If in our rankings a county was listed in the top 25% of a category, it received four stars; if it was in the second 25%, it received three stars; and so on.

## **And That's Not All**

Though we packed as much as we could into the magazine, there is a wealth of information on our Web site.

You'll find links to more details about our top 10 choices, as well as photo galleries for each of them. You'll also find the top 20 rural counties in each region, along with the complete statistical breakdowns that helped us make our charts and more (population density, climate, crime indices, student/teacher ratios, number of hospitals and clinics, state income tax rates, and county sales tax).

We've compiled it all on our Web site at:

**[www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces](http://www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces)**