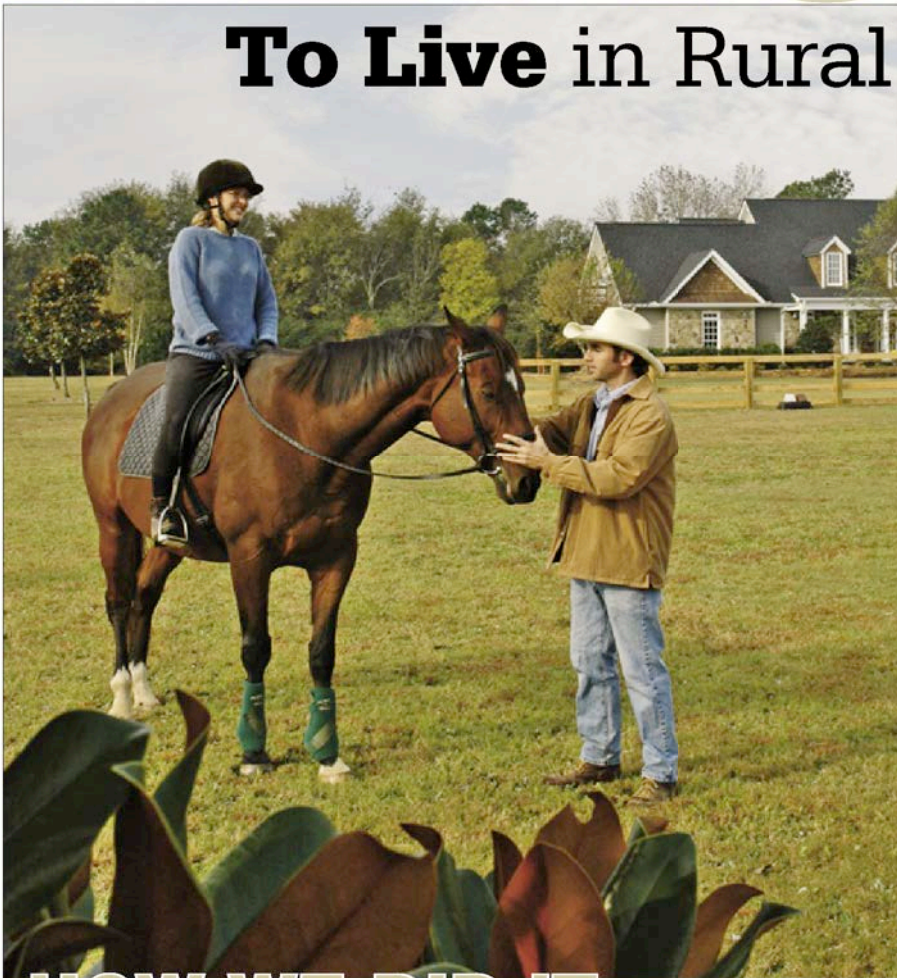


BEST PLACES

To Live in Rural America



HOW WE DID IT

COUNTIES IN THE overall top 10 and the regional top 20 lists are ranked first according to **cost of living** (the ratio of average household income to average household spending). You can see those numbers on our web site. Then we created a formula that takes into account **crime rates**, **air quality**, **access to health care** (the number of medical professionals per thousand people), **education** (student/teacher ratios and college-bound percentages) and **leisure activities** (restaurants, museums, parks, golf courses, etc.). All statistics were provided to us by OnBoard LLC, a real estate and demographic research firm. For more on how we compiled the list, visit www.pfbestplaces.com.

Here it is, our second annual list of the best rural counties in the country. But this year we made some changes to how they were chosen.

After last year's list, we received an enormous amount of feedback from readers. You let us know what was important to you in a place to live, and we used your suggestions to reshape our research. Statistics were weighed differently, and when we traveled to these places, we kept our eyes open for the things our readers look for when they settle down at a place in the country.

Though we ran the numbers thoroughly (with the help of OnBoard LLC, the same statistical research firm that helps *Money* magazine with its annual Best Places issue), lists such as this are always going to be somewhat subjective. That's why we created a web site (www.pfbestplaces.com) where you can compile your own list by telling our exclusive survey what's important to your rural lifestyle. Visit the web site and try it out.

So turn the page and open the fold to see the counties we chose for this year's top 10. We think you'll enjoy taking this trip with us.

1

Ontario County, New York



When the last of the Ice Age glaciers receded 10,000 years ago, they had given upstate New York two magnificent creations: Giant grooves in the earth that, high on the slopes, give breathtaking views of the land and of the deep, clear lakes below. And on the flatter ground, the glaciers deposited some of the best farmland in the United States.

The people of Ontario County treasure both.

The Progressive Farmer puts this county in its list of top counties for many reasons. Great schools. Low crime. Excellent health care. And residents here are just a short 45 minutes from Rochester, N.Y., a wonderful city with an easily accessible international airport.

But Ontario County tops our list because of the people and the communities they've created. Instead of just relying on what they've been given—a great resource in the land—they have worked together to make the most of it and to preserve it.

Tourism is blossoming, thanks largely to the county's agricultural heritage. Ever heard of a grape pie? No? Well go to Naples, where this self-proclaimed (and who's going to challenge them on this?) "Grape Pie Capital of the World" brings in well over 100,000 visitors during the few weeks of grape harvest. When it's over, about two-dozen women have sold more than 70,000 pies from their kitchens. (For a recipe, turn to page 64.) The Concord grape may not be as popular as it once was, but folks here still find it quite useful, thank you very much.

Along routes 20 and 5 and its many side roads are dozens of stands where you can pick up in-season vegetables—squash, beans, corn, they have it all, including the very abundant cabbage. (Yes, this also is the "Cabbage Capital of the World.") At these roadside stands, the honor system still applies—every stand has a small box in which to put your money if the farmer isn't home. But if you're lucky, he will be and will talk about agriculture—and the weather, of course.





The county nurtures plenty of other tourism opportunities, including a growing wine industry. Cornell University's experiment station in the county is doing some of the best grape research in the world. Nancy Irelan, a vice president at E. & J. Gallo Winery in California, made frequent trips to the area and fell in love with it. She and her husband now have land just south of Geneva and recently planted their first grape cuttings. The plan is to one day move here and operate their own small winery. "It's all about the community and the family," says Irelan of their decision. "There are a lot of people here who are committed to community."



Despite sprawl pressures from Rochester, farms here are still farms. They haven't all been divided into 40-acre parcels and then cut into 10-acre plots. Residents place a high priority on keeping their rural roots. Farmers are a big part of the government, and they decided some years ago to limit housing development on good farmland. Yes, most people call it zoning, but it was done by bottom-up planning from local communities, not top-down from county officials.

Action like that takes coordination and agreement. We repeatedly heard how well the county's various elected officials work together, regardless of party affiliation. And when debate on an issue ends, people here agree to move on and make it work.

Pat Pavelsky, executive director of the county's Extension office, says she had never seen anything like it before she arrived two and a half years ago. "There is a culture of cooperation that exists here that really gets things done," she explains.

At a time when the word "government" is so negative, look to Ontario County to see how its residents make it work. Longtime county planner Kris Hughes is impressed. "It's democracy the way it was supposed to work."

—Story and Photos By Joe Link

Ontario at a glance



Population	103,127
Population Density	155/mi²
Low Crime.....	★★★★
Low Pollution.....	★★★☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★☆☆
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities.....	★★★☆☆

Children in Clifton Springs play touch football (top). It's all part of the job: Police officer Mike Cole helps capture an escaped pig on its way to market in Canandaigua, the county seat (below).





Population	13,166
Population Density	28/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★★
Low Pollution.....	★★★★
Access to Health Care	★★☆☆
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities	★★☆☆

Union County, South Dakota

When God made Union County, he must have had the artistic one-third/two-thirds rule in mind. About a third of the county is bottomland, formed by the Missouri and the Big Sioux rivers that border it. The fertile land is ideal for corn and soybeans, and that's what you see as you drive through it: flat fields with river bluffs on the far horizon. That, and grain elevators and farm towns that wait patiently for the crop's bounty to flow in.

The other two-thirds of Union County is hilly. Row crops cling to the gentler slopes and lie in the valleys while cattle graze the steeper hillsides.

This is the rock-solid Midwest. It's where Norwegian-American author Ole Edvart Rolvaag was inspired to write "Giants in the Earth," a book about hard times on the frontier. Those times have gone, but the hard work and patience the pioneers inspired have made Union County prosperous. Its schools are good, its towns neat and its people friendly.

Interstate 29 is the major artery that brings people and commerce to the county. It runs between Sioux Falls to the north and Sioux City, Iowa, to the south. In that southern tip of the county, computer manufacturing and other light industry have brought white-collar income. These industries helped

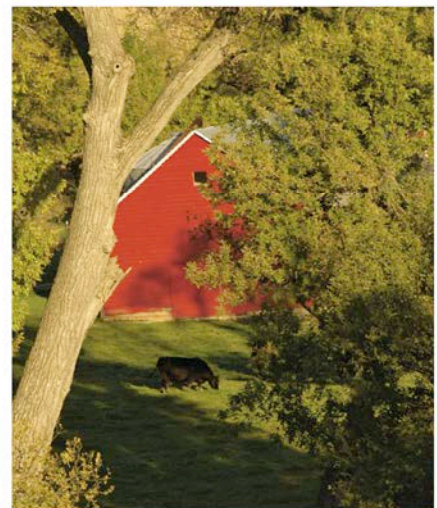
create the planned community of Dakota Dunes with its golf course, medical center and shops.

The rest of the county is rural: small towns, farmsteads and wide-open spaces. It's the kind of place where rural churches sit placidly by the road, their white steeples peeking over the windbreak trees that shelter them. It's where an old-

fashioned soda fountain—Edgar's in Elk Point (left)—is one of the county's major tourist attractions (for a recipe from Edgar's, see page 64). And it's where fourth-generation farmer Patrick Walsh, 61, has deep roots.

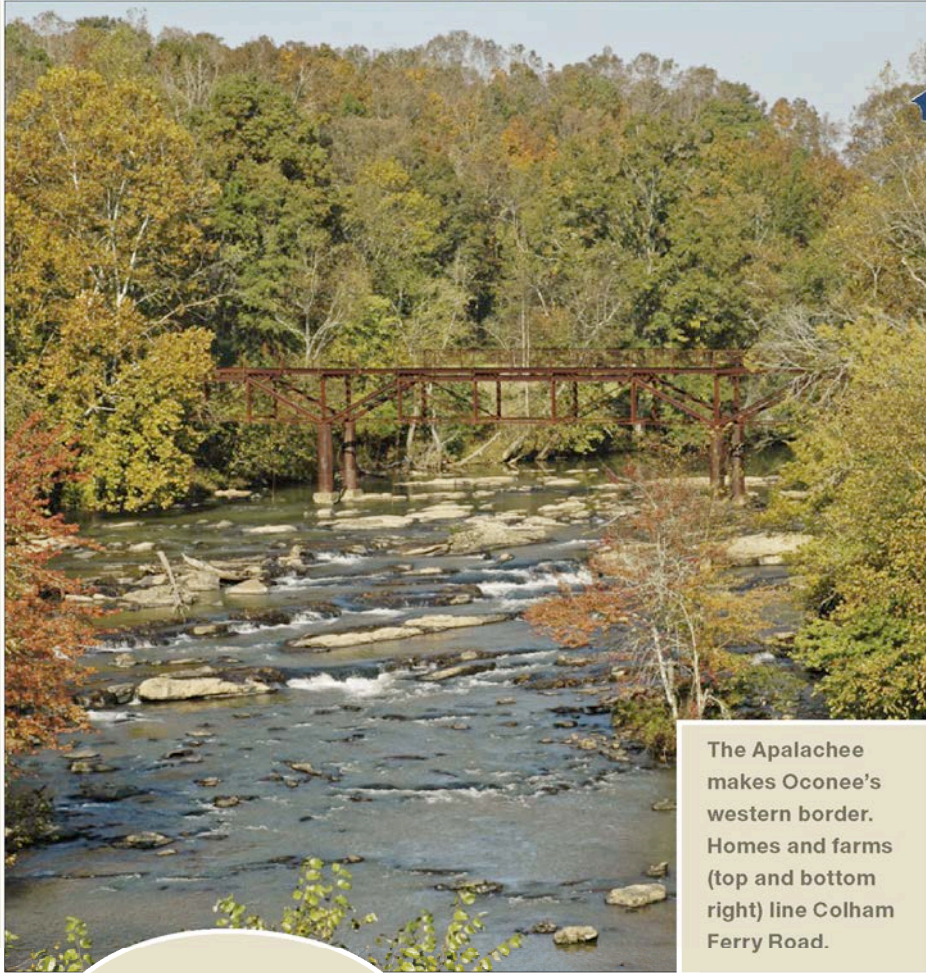
"See that grove of trees about a quarter mile away?" he asks, pointing. "That's where I grew up. Didn't go very far, did I? No reason to."

—Story and Photos By Jim Patrico



Pastoral beauty in the Midwest's Union County, S.D., means red barns (above) and cattle as well sheep owned by Patrick and Cheryl Walsh (below).

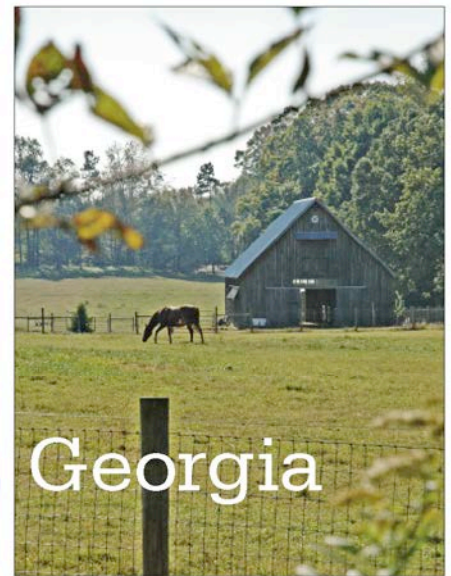




The Apalachee makes Oconee's western border. Homes and farms (top and bottom right) line Colham Ferry Road.



Population	28,647
Population Density	153/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★★
Low Pollution.....	★★★★
Access to Health Care	★★☆☆
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities.....	★★☆☆



Oconee County, Georgia

Oconee County is one of only two places that made our top 10 two years in a row. Considering how extensively we changed our formula from last year, that's especially impressive.

It's not surprising, though. Drive down Colham Ferry Road through the middle of the county, watching on both sides of the road as family farms, beatific country homes and horse barns pass. Walk the sidewalks in the county seat of Watkinsville, where historic buildings stand next to a beautiful new City Center complex (middle right) that centralizes businesses and preserves the small-town flavor. Hike along the Apalachee River and the county's nature trails. All this and it's just across the Oconee River from Athens and the University of Georgia.

When Oconee County appeared on our list last year, one resident told us that "every realtor within 100 miles of here will use that to sell land." Folks in the county have a strong commitment, though, to maintaining their rural lifestyle (see "A Forever Farm," page 39).

That kind of commitment is attractive to newer residents like Jim and Chris Altizer, who moved to Oconee County just months ago. Their daughter Sonia is an ecology professor at the University of Georgia. "It's peaceful here, and it's a perfect place to settle," says Jim, who has just built new wood fencing, a barn and a horse run on his acreage. Sonia keeps her horse there and stops by frequently to ride the pastures.

Young families are drawn to the county by some of the state's best schools. The relatively small Oconee County School District sports excellent test scores and gets great reviews from parents.

—Story and Photos By Jamie Cole





A new covered bridge in Littleton is a nod to the town's heritage. A church steeple in Lyme (below) is like those found in every small town.

Grafton County,

New Hampshire

Abundant streams run cold and clear throughout this enormous New England county. The scenic White Mountain National Forest brings in lots of visitors—for the winter skiing, the numerous hiking trails, the brilliant displays of fall colors. But long after they're gone, the country, towns and people, well, you'll find them to be pretty much like they've always been.

"It's quaint here," says Joe Kensella as Bristol barber Dove Cote cuts his hair (below). "Nothing changes too much." Cote, who's been barbering in this tiny shop for 43 years, chimes in, "like this chair; it's over 100 years old." This is the kind of place where people come in to visit for a while just to watch hair getting cut.

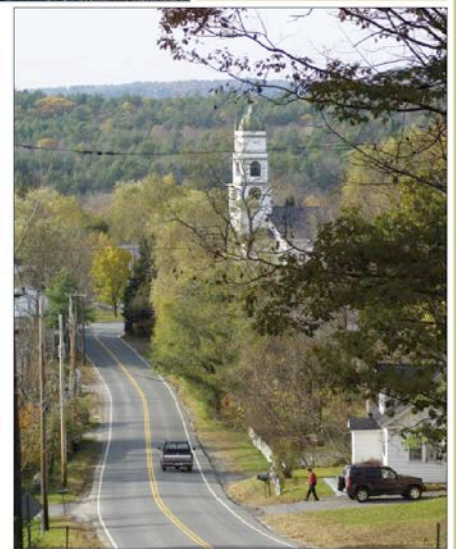
Residents here can add one more "stays the same" to the list: This is the second year the county has made it on *The Progressive Farmer's* list of top 10 counties.

A drive through the county reveals wonderful little towns such as Bristol, Plymouth, Littleton and Hanover, home of Ivy League's Dartmouth College. And in between the towns are crossroads stores where you can find just a little of everything, from bologna sandwiches at lunch to plenty of Doe-In-Heat scent during deer season.

Most of the land here is in timber (90%), but the clearings stand out. On the hillsides lie green pastures and stark white aspens; in the bottomlands, crops.

In so many of the important categories we considered—crime rates, health care, the quality of education—Grafton County ranks high in the United States. And despite its slow economic growth, jobs are good here, unemployment is low and the cost of living is favorable. Things might not change much in this part of the world, and people here like that just fine.

—Story and Photos By Joe Link



Grafton at a glance

Woodsville

Population	84,766
Population Density	48/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★☆☆
Low Pollution.....	★★★☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★★
Education.....	★★★☆☆
Leisure Activities	★★★★



Kendall County, Texas

A limestone home and farm outside Sisterdale (top); the Bergheim General Store and Post Office has been in Stanley Jones' family for three generations (bottom).

The American Southwest meets German heritage in the Texas Hill Country, and Kendall County is exemplary of that merging of cultures.

To the north, cattle, sheep and goat ranches sprawl for thousands of acres. In the southern part of the county, closest to San Antonio, new communities with million-dollar-plus farmettes stand beside huge family ranches. Some of those ranches have been broken up and sold, but many of the tracts are still hundreds of acres in size.

Residents are keen to preserve their heritage, be it German or agricultural. Kristy Watson lives with her husband, Todd, on 10 acres near Bergheim. Her business is a urethane plastic horseshoe she invented, but her passion is clearly the Agricultural Heritage Museum, located in the county seat of Boerne. "Some of our newer residents didn't grow up on farms or ranches," she says. "It's important that they and their kids learn about what's important in Kendall County." Schoolkids come to the museum to visit exhibits donated by local farm families.

Many of those families have been in the county for generations. Roy Kneupper

(left) raises sheep and goats near Sisterdale and lives in a house his grandparents built. His son attends Tarleton State University in Stephans, Texas, studies ag and plans to return to the family ranch one day. "It's just what he wants to do," says Kneupper.

German influence isn't hard to spot either, especially if you're in Boerne during the summer. Every other Sunday a traditional German band gathers and plays

under the gazebo in the center of town while residents dance and picnic. Dozens of respected artists call the county home, and galleries line Main Street in Boerne.

People are moving to Kendall County for land that is still affordable and schools that residents say are the best in Hill Country. One rancher we talked to says he knows growth is inevitable. But he believes new residents can learn to respect the land that has been so good to generations of ranchers, if they will listen to those in the know and learn to be good stewards.

—Story and Photos By Jamie Cole

Kendall at a glance



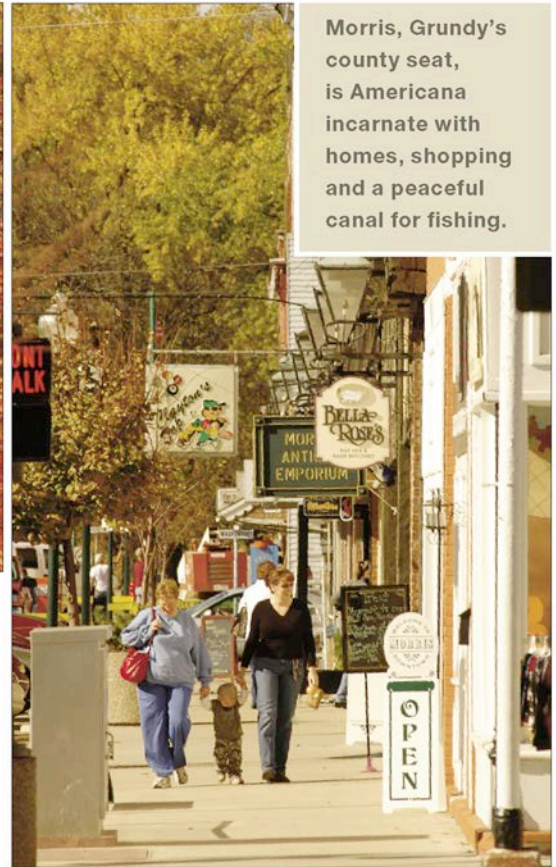
Population	26,915
Population Density	40/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★☆☆
Low Pollution.....	★★★★
Access to Health Care	★★★☆☆
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities	★★★☆☆





Grundy County, Illinois

Morris, Grundy's county seat, is Americana incarnate with homes, shopping and a peaceful canal for fishing.



Noreen Dollinger has a real sense of place, and her place is in Grundy County, Ill. The Dollinger farm has been in the family since 1852, but Noreen will tell you that the land was home to Native Americans first, then to the white settlement of Dresden. "It is nice living in a place like Grundy County where people know each other and have a long history together," Dollinger says.

But things are changing. The northeast corner of the county is only 60 miles from downtown Chicago, and urbanization is seeping in quickly. The once-tiny town of Channahon is a forest of stud walls and exposed trusses as homes and townhomes spring up almost overnight.

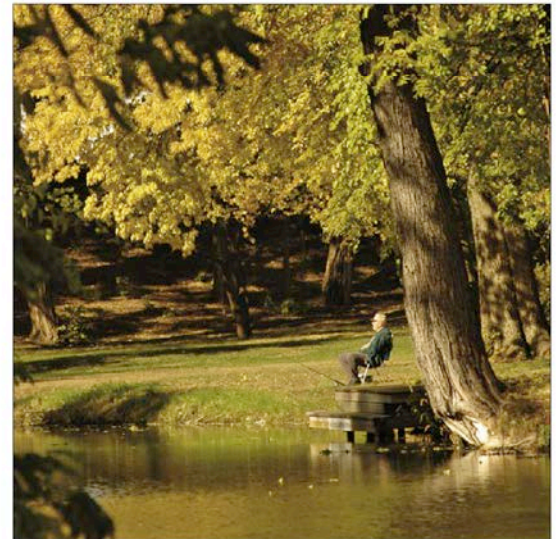
Move a few miles from Grundy's northeast corner and urbanization recedes quickly. Morris (population 13,000) is the county seat whose vibrant downtown looks like a Rockwell painting. Off to the east and southeast are nature areas along the Illinois, Kankakee, Des Plaines and Mazon rivers. Parks and hiking trails rub elbows with hunting preserves and fishing areas. The bulk of Grundy County is what you would expect in Illinois: deep black soils, some of the richest farmland in the world. Little towns like Verona, Mazon and Gardner grew up around grain elevators, railroads and highways.

Near Gardner, Scott Halpin milks dairy cows and raises his young family on land the Halpins have farmed for 90 years. The life is still good, but Scott looks with some apprehension at the expensive homes across the road from his modest white farmhouse. "If you want a picture," he says, "you should come out here when the cows are in the pasture and all those big homes are right next to them. That's the future here."

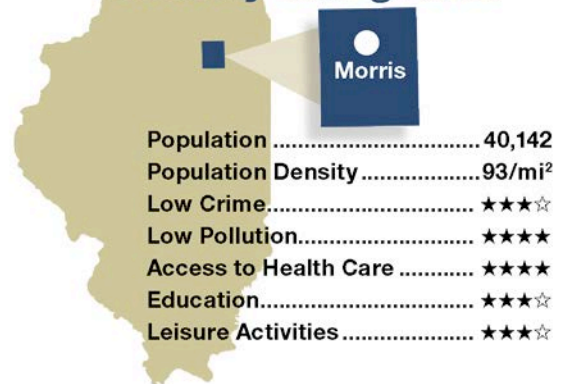
But that's not to say farms and new homes can't coexist. In fact, Noreen Dollinger (left) is optimistic that they can.

"Part of our challenge and our goal," Dollinger says, "is to keep our community attitude and spirit alive as we welcome new people."

—Story and Photos
By Jim Patricio



Grundy at a glance



This small county lies at the tip of the state's Northern Neck, a peninsula jutting out where the Rappahannock River enters the Chesapeake Bay. While driving there, you get the feeling you're about to reach road's end. It would be more appropriate to say it's the road's beginning, for this is where some of the earliest English settlers set foot. When Captain John Smith came in 1608, he described it as "a place where heaven and earth never agreed better to frame man's habitation." History is indeed rich here. It's where George Washington's mother was born; the former President himself was born nearby.

Today the county and its residents are in transition. Settlers may have come for the agriculture, but few full-time farmers are left, probably less than a dozen. "It's a real pretty area," says Ronald Forrester, a third-generation farmer (below). "Right now we're getting a lot of pressure from developers." As in many areas of the United States, developers have driven land prices up beyond what farming will pay. But what irks Forrester and others the most is when they take good farmland instead of the marginal land. "Once the farmland is gone, it's gone forever," notes Forrester.

Lancaster County, Virginia

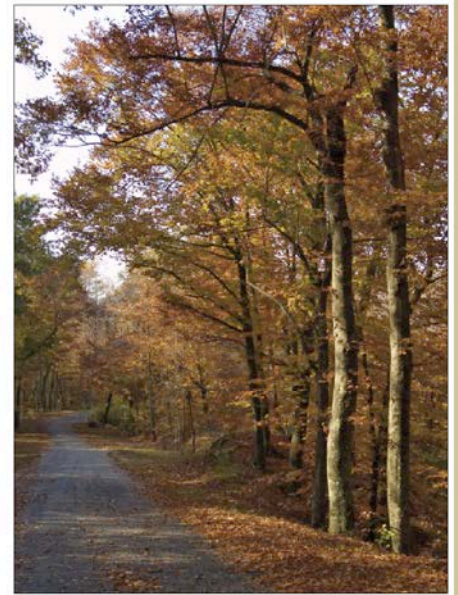
Much attention now is on the coast with its 280 miles of shoreline. You'll find a lot of second homes here. But locals enjoy the county's benefits year-round—quiet living, low crime (see page 4), good education and modern health care. And for seafood lovers, this is the place to be. Fishermen bring in some of the best seafood to be had, including their famous blue crabs.

The pace of life is slow and easy here. Several residents told us that Native Americans used to call this area "the land of the peaceful living." We couldn't confirm that historically, but after a few days there, we also wouldn't be surprised if it were true.

—Story and Photos By Joe Link



Population	12,236
Population Density	82/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★☆☆
Low Pollution.....	★★★☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★★
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities.....	★★★☆☆



With a small population, the county has plenty of unspoiled spots left. Second homes on the coast are plentiful, but property taxes have remained low for full-time residents.



Boone at a glance

Population	50,364
Population Density	119/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★★★
Low Pollution.....	★☆☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★★
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities.....	★★★☆

Boone County, Indiana

Residents of Boone County enjoy—and in some cases are wary of—a rare dichotomy. They fall into the sprawling, nine-county metro area of Indianapolis, America’s 12th largest city, and can enjoy all the benefits of living within an hour’s drive of just about any modern convenience imaginable. But drive north into Boone County from Indianapolis and you’ll notice an almost instant change once you cross Interstate 465. The telltale signs of city and suburban life give way to corn fields, family farms and small towns. It’s everything you expect from rural America.

That’s not by accident. “There’s an unspoken commitment among all of us to maintain that small-town feel,” says Chamber of Commerce director A.J. Siegmann. He and his wife live in Zionsville (middle right), an idyllic town with a thriving, brick-paved Main Street lined with antique stores, art galleries and restaurants.

Double-digit population growth has made available land scarce in the southern part of the county as young families move north from the city. That’s understandable, since Boone is the only county in Indiana where all the school systems are in the top 25% statewide.

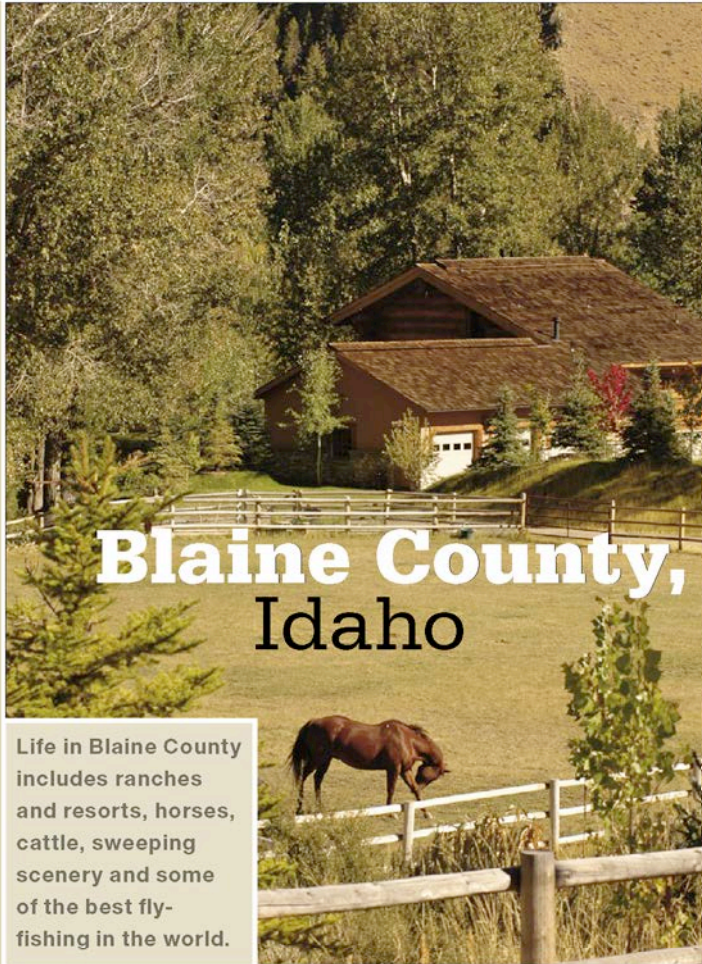
“It’s a great place to raise kids,” says Virginia Mazurowski (right), who runs a flower farm and catering business outside the county seat of Lebanon. She and her husband, Norman, have called Boone County home for 30 years.

She says residents are wary of growth from the south and remain committed to the county’s agricultural roots. “I keep expecting that corn field across the road to disappear,” she says. “But I’ve been saying that for 20 years, and it hasn’t happened yet.” Indeed, Boone County ranks No. 3 and No. 7 in soybean and corn production, respectively, out of the state’s 92 counties.

George Shelburne doesn’t mind that Boone County is slow to change. George’s daughter Nadine Anderson runs a small business in Zionsville, where George and grandson Alex (above right) can play together on the sidewalks without worry. “I was drafted in 1966, saw a lot of the world in the military, and came home to Boone County,” says George. And like his fellow residents, he likes it just the way it is. So did we.

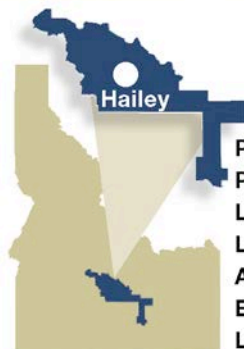
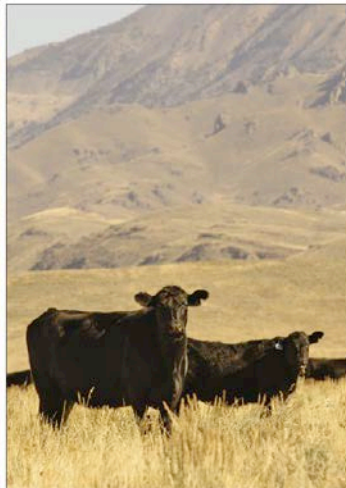
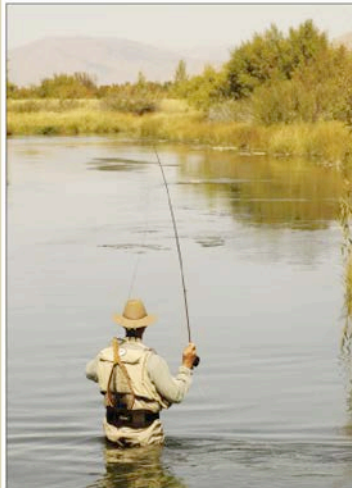
—Story and Photos By Jamie Cole





Blaine County, Idaho

Life in Blaine County includes ranches and resorts, horses, cattle, sweeping scenery and some of the best fly-fishing in the world.



Blaine at a glance

Population	21,346
Population Density	8/mi ²
Low Crime.....	★★☆☆
Low Pollution.....	★★☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★★
Education.....	★★★★
Leisure Activities	★★★★

Blaine County, Idaho, is a meeting place in the mountains. Wealth meets wilderness. Resort living meets ranching. French restaurants meet feed stores. It's a jumble of cultures that sometimes clash. But in the laid-back big West, with its vastness and calming beauty, it's a jumble that works.

The mountains are the Rockies, specifically the spectacular Sawtooth Range: jagged tops with sloping sides that empty into showy valleys veined with sparkling rivers.

In the far north of the county, the mountains are untamed and mostly unsettled. U.S. Park Service roads and hiking trails outnumber county roads. North of Galena Summit (elevation: 8,780 feet), the Salmon River is born, and salmon spawn in preparation for their incredible journey 900 miles to the Pacific Ocean. In the southern part of the county, the Big Wood River flows, teeming with rainbow trout, through valleys where hay and cattle prosper. In between is Sun Valley, home to the first ski resort in the United States (established in 1936) and the economic engine that drives Blaine County's prosperity.

Funky, busy Ketchum is the gateway to Sun Valley. Its origins as a mining town are barely recognizable among the restaurants, gift shops and hotels. There are more art galleries than gas stations in Ketchum and almost as many berets as cowboy hats.

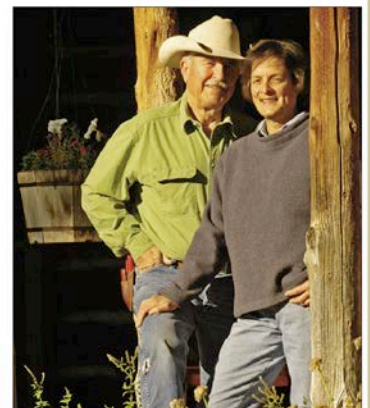
Landscape and still-life painter Lori McNee Watson (below) arrived 20 years ago for a skiing vacation and stayed for the duration. "The local art scene inspired me," she says. Now she is one of the area's hottest artists.



Some of the natives may resent landowners who are in residence for only a few weeks each year. But locals also understand that money flows from these mountain retreats and from the throngs of tourists. It flows to shops and businesses, to building contractors and grocery stores. It also flows to schools, which are among the best in the state, and to state-of-the-art medical and law-enforcement services.

John Peavey understands this as well as anyone. His family has ranched in the county for three generations—four when you count his son Tom. And while cattle and sheep put money in John's pocket, he is thankful that the county does not have to depend entirely on agriculture. Peavey and his wife, Diane (right), can stand on the porch of their log ranch house and enjoy the view. Or Diane can stand at her kitchen window and hear a mountain brook babble not 10 yards away. "Isn't that just lovely?" she asks. Yes, it is.

—Story and Photos By
Jim Patricio





Hood River
at a
glance



Population	20,854
Population Density	39/mi ²
Low Crime	★★☆☆
Low Pollution	★★☆☆
Access to Health Care	★★★★
Education	★★★★
Leisure Activities	★★★★

Hood River County, Oregon

It's almost unfair (to those of us who don't live there) that one place could be so beautiful. Those lucky souls who live in Hood River County, Ore., awake each morning to vistas of snow-capped Mount Hood to the south, stately Mount Adam to the north and the gorgeous Columbia River gorge between. Through this beauty flows the Hood River valley with its cliffs and crags and improbably round hills formed by volcanic bubbles.

Man has had a hand in the scenery too. What is prettier than fruit orchards and vineyards marching row upon row up the green slopes? The orchards provide more than beauty. Hood River County lives the good life because of fruits; more than 14,000 acres of apples, pears and grapes produce a cash flow that keeps the economy humming.

Three generations of the Webster family have planted fruit trees in the valley. Brothers Scott and Addison (left, with daughter Sydney) are in charge now and have diversified the orchards and fresh-fruit business to include fruit baskets and gourmet gifts with "The Fruit Company" brand name. Addison's wife, Necole, loves her adopted orchardist lifestyle. "On days when there is going to be a frost, the whole neighborhood is energized to protect the trees. It's such a close community," she says.

But Hood River County does not prosper because of fruit alone. Timber is a major industry. The Columbia River, a floating highway for commerce to and from the coast, also means jobs for the county.

That same river is a playground and a moneymaker for another reason: Nature made the Columbia River Gorge one of the windiest places on the planet. Today, downtown Hood River is packed with newly renovated buildings that house wind-related shops: windsurfing equipment, apparel, kites. Windsurfers have to eat, so there are restaurants and pubs, Italian eateries and sushi cafes.

Only an hour from Portland, Hood River County also draws day-trippers, come to see the green valleys, the mountain views and the windy gorge. But these folks only get to stay for a while. The lucky souls of Hood River County get to stay . . . because they are already home.

—Story and Photos By Jim Patricio

