

DeKalb County falls short in USDA rankings, but residents say beauty is here

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DeKALB – In a snapshot, DeKalb County can look awfully boring – but there is a certain appeal to the Illinois flatlands Sycamore resident Jane Calhoun says.

Calhoun, who moved to Sycamore about a year ago from the Milwaukee area, said that she has found beauty and community in DeKalb County, no matter what some may say about rural living.

“The charm is that you can see all these beautiful homesteads,” Calhoun said.

In a [recent analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture data by](#) the Washington Post, DeKalb County ranked behind 97 percent of the 3,111 counties in the continental U.S. in terms natural amenities that “enhance the location as a place to live.” The data took into account factors like scenic beauty and variation, climate and proximity to bodies of water.

DeKalb County ranked No. 3,020. Nearby counties also fared poorly in the rankings: McHenry (2,739), Winnebago (2,786), Kane (2,855). Even LaSalle County, home to Starved Rock State Park, was listed at No. 2,853. Lake Michigan likely helped Cook County to 2,156 and Lake County to 1,667. Ventura County, California, north of Los Angeles took the top spot on the list and Red Lake County in northwestern Minnesota was last.

Although DeKalb County may not offer mild winters or days at the seaside, Calhoun says she finds joy in what the county does have to offer – a sense of small town community with access to downtown shopping and entertainment, rural landscapes and extensive outdoor activities like biking through forest preserves and along the Kishwaukee River bike path and the Great Western Nature Trail, which runs 18 miles from Sycamore to St. Charles.

“I started bicycling in the spring,” she said. “Last winter, I did snowshoeing, and I found that enjoyable. You don’t have to go far to do these things.”

Diana Robinson, director of Northern Illinois University’s Center for Governmental Studies, said that although studies like these can be fun, they shouldn’t sway residents from make a life-altering decision, like moving cross-county to California, for example.

“It depends on what you are looking for,” she said. “You could have very different results if you looked at things like clearly marked seasons, which some people love, or quality education. ... You could almost make [rankings] look any way you wanted to, by using the right variables.”

The original USDA report found that natural amenities drove population change in rural areas, but Robinson said she has found that economic opportunities drive more population change than anything else. It'd be a luxury for most to be able to move just to be in nicer climate, she said.

“For most people, it is more of a function of where can you go, that is nearby, where you can find a job and career opportunities to live a quality life,” she said. “In that case, climate and seasonal variations can be part of the package.”

Paul Holcomb said he has lived in DeKalb County for more than 20 years and likes the changes of the season, especially in the fall.

“We have forest preserves that are gorgeous,” he said. “Scenic beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Sure, the Grand Canyon is scenic and we don't have that kind of thing, but to me, there is beauty in a rural, quiet country road, be it spring, winter summer or fall. The seasonal changes are beauty in itself.”

Many mentioned the ample parks and forest preserves the county has to offer, including Debbie Armstrong, director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“Our forest preserves are beautiful and diverse,” Armstrong said. “Russell Woods has a Nature Center and provides programming from star gazing to tapping trees for maple syrup. Lake Shabbona is a year-round attraction the provides a beautiful setting for fishing and getting in touch with nature year-round.”

OUTBOX

USDA natural amenities scale

1. Ventura County, California
2. Humboldt County, California
- 1,508. Carroll County, Illinois
- 1,562. Door County, Wisconsin
- 1,667. Lake County, Illinois
- 1,754. Jo Daviess County, Illinois
- 2,156. Cook County, Illinois
- 2,739. McHenry County, Illinois
- 2,786. Winnebago County, Illinois
- 2,853. LaSalle County, Illinois
- 3,020. DeKalb County, Illinois
- 3,097. Champaign County, Illinois
- 3,111. Red Lake County, Minnesota

Sources: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/natural-amenities-scale.aspx>;

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/08/17/every-county-in-america-ranked-by-natural-beauty/>

Explainer

The natural amenities scale is a measure of the physical characteristics of a county area that

enhance the location as a place to live. The scale was constructed by combining six measures of climate, topography, and water area that reflect environmental qualities most people prefer. These measures are warm winter, winter sun, temperate summer, low summer humidity, topographic variation, and water area. The data are available for counties in the lower 48 States. The file contains the original measures and standardized scores for each county as well as the amenities scale.

Source: USDA Economic Research Service

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