THROUGH EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH, OUTDOOR LIFE REVEALS AMERICA’S TOP 200 TOWNS FOR HUNTERS AND FISHERMEN TO CALL HOME

by Andrew McKean

Paradise Found

WE’VE ALl VISItED THE KIND OF TOWN with a river running through it, woodlands nudging the outskirts and a café that’s crowded at 5 a.m. with duck hunters and trout guides. As we leave, we wonder why we can’t be lucky enough to live there. Many hunters and fisherman are looking to sink their roots in a new hometown, to raise a family where campsites outnumber condos, or retire to a place where it’s as easy to catch a bass as it is to catch a commercial flight.

That’s why Outdoor Life has scoured towns across America to find the places that offer world-class hunting and fishing, easy access to public land and water, and vibrant economies that remain affordable and hospitable, places where you can always find a “hunter’s breakfast” on the café menu.

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The first time Henry Seay fished northern Arkansas’ White River Gorge, he knew he’d buy a house nearby. That was seven years ago. Today, the retiree from Phoenix owns a fish camp, Rim Shoals Resort, right on the bank of the trophy-trout stream. Seay still fishes the White River twice a week and adorns the walls of his business with evidence of his success, including mounts of brown trout pushing 30 inches.

Trout fishing in north-central Arkansas rivals any Rocky Mountain destination. The White, Buffalo, Little Red and North Fork rivers boast hundreds of trout per mile, thanks to the cold-water habitat below the region’s bottom-release dams. The mineral content in the water fuels growth rates. The North Fork River gave up a 38½-pound brown trout two decades ago, and the constellation of fly shops in the area are decorated with photos of 5- to 8-pound trout.

Warm-water anglers have a playground west of town on Bull Shoals Lake, where walleyes, bream, bass and crappies are caught in flooded timber and off rocky points. Norfork Lake’s striped and hybrid bass reach 30 pounds of scrappy, reel-screaming action.

Main draws: World-class fishing for large-mouth and striped bass, walleyes, crappies and trout in the White River and Bull Shoals and Norfork lakes. Hunt turkeys, squirrels, deer, ducks and black bears in the Ozark National Forest.

Population: 12,215
Median home price: $92,900
Amenities: Excellent hospitals and schools, low crime rate, a vibrant retail economy and a cohesive community make this a great place to raise children or to retire.

Bottom line: Few towns have as great a diversity of fishing or such close proximity to boat ramps and trailheads.

Info: enjoymountainhome.com

Hells Canyon might be the deepest, most forbidding gorge in North America, but the Snake River that carved it is an oasis of fishing opportunity. If you can navigate the boat-crushing rapids, you’ll catch channel catfish, salmon, steelhead and smallmouth, plus sturgeon that weigh more than your fishing buddy. Elk, mountain goats, bighorn sheep and deer cling to the canyon’s walls, and wingshooters with good boots and better dogs hunt chukar partridge among the pumice and basalt cliffs.

Lewiston lies at the bottom of the canyon, where the Snake flattens out and joins the Clearwater River on its way to the Columbia River. A series of locks and dams allow oceangoing ships to navigate the Snake to Lewiston, and if the barriers have reduced the runs of salmon and steelhead that enter Idaho, they have brought the Pacific Rim economy inland.

You’ll find a river-running jet boat on every block and a hunting or fishing guide on every other bar stool.

Main draws: Glorious diversity of opportunity, from smallmouth bass and 9-foot white sturgeon in the Snake to strong runs of magnum steelhead in the Clearwater. Easy access to black bears, elk and deer (both whitetails and muleys) in national forests in Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

Population: 31,293
Median home price: $144,700
Amenities: With five boat ramps located right in town, the sunniest city in the Pacific Northwest is also one of the most angler-friendly. Lewis-Clark State College and a civic theater lend cultural opportunities.

Bottom line: Steelhead dominate the headlines, but hunting for upland birds—chukar, pheasant, grouse and quail—is terrific.

Info: www.lewistonchamber.org
outside Sheridan’s city limits, you can cast a dry fly to alpine trout in the morning and troll for reservoir walleyes in the afternoon. You can bugle in an elk on Saturday and bag a limit of pheasants after Sunday’s sermon.

In this north-central Wyoming town, the prairie meets the mountains, and the Old West’s traditions meet the New West’s chic. Dusty flatbed pickups share downtown parking space with gleaming Jaguars. But unlike that other Wyoming mountain town—Jackson—home prices here remain affordable and family restaurants still outnumber gourmet cafés.

Just west of town, the Bighorn Mountains offer endless hunting access and hundreds of miles of trout water in small streams and alpine lakes. To the east, antelope, mule deer and varmints abound on the prairie. A number of reservoirs—including crappie-rich Tongue River Reservoir and trout-filled Lake DeSmet—keep still-water anglers happy.

The area is changing—large ranches are being bought by refugees from Hollywood and Wall Street—but Sheridan is still the sort of town where the locals wave whether they know you or not.

main draws: Abundant elk, moose and deer in the forested Bighorn Mountains just west of town, and pronghorns to the east. The Tongue River transitions from a trout stream to a warm-water gem just north of Sheridan, and the gold-ribbon Bighorn River is just across the Montana state line.

POPULATION: 16,429
MEDIAN HOME PRICE: $108,500
AMENITIES: Vibrant Western art scene, old-fashioned downtown and destination golf courses framed by the jagged Cloud Peaks.

BOTTOM LINE: Locals say Sheridan is what Jackson Hole was 50 years ago: unpretentious, affordable, neighborly and within a half-step of an expansive outdoor playground. In other words, get in on the ground floor.

INFO: sheridanwyoming.org
**Cody, Wyoming**

**Gateway to Yellowstone Park**

**Fishable Species:** B  
**Huntable Species:** B+  
**Public-Land Proximity:** B+  
**Trophy Potential:** B+  
**Gun Laws:** A

The Best of the Rest

Our Top 10 list is clearly dominated by towns in the states of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Here’s a look at the top three towns in regions outside the Upper Rocky Mountains (excluding any towns that were included in the Top 10).

**Northeast**

- **Burlington, VT (36, Overall):** This vibrant college town on the shores of Lake Champlain offers outstanding bass, trout and panfish action, plus whitefish, ducks and moose.
  - **Cumberland, ME (37):** Lake trout, smallmouth and brook trout abound in the rivers and lakes in and around this Down East village that’s within easy driving distance of coastalstripes. Heavyweight bucks, bunnies and wild turkeys are available in nearby White Mountain National Forest.
  - **Osseo, NY (64):** You can call into a spring gobbler at sunrise and be casting to cranking steelhead on the Oswego River before lunch. Target salmon, pike, trout, whitefish and pike here, too.

**South**

- **Rogers, AR (30):** Stripers, largemouths, smallmouths, catfish and speckled bass make Beaver Lake a warm-water gem. Residents are close to deer, turkeys and waterfowl in the Ozark National Forest and the hogs, whitetails and squirrels here, too.
  - **Lufkin, TX (35):** Bass anglers descend on nearby American Falls reservoir—the largest reservoir in Idaho—offers a neglected perch fishery and football-size rainbows. The Portneuf River, right in Pocatello, allows residents to catch a trout after work.
  - **Logan, UT (12):** A college town with a trout stream in its center, prosperous Logan books onto the deer-rich Wasatch-Cache National Forest and offers super waterfowl hunting on the Bear River Refuge.

**Midwest**

- **Williston, ND (18):** If you can stand the winter windchill, there’s outstanding pheasant, waterfowl and deer hunting nearby, plus walleyes and pike fishing on Lake Sakakawea.
  - **Reno, NV (19):** Legendary walleyes and pike fishing on local lakes get the headlines, but this is an overlooked spot for waterfowl, whitetail and bear hunting. Turkey hunting is improving on nearby state and national forests.
  - **Booneville, MO (23):** The wide bottoms of the Missouri River hold trophy whites, abundant turkey and waterfowl. The Missouri itself holds catfish, bass and even paddlefish.

**Southwest**

- **Richfield, UT (17):** Public land and deer and elk hunting starts at the city limits on the Fishlake National Forest. Trout fishing on nearby Sevier River is great in the spring and fall.
  - **Logan, UT (12):** A college town with a trout stream in its center, prosperous Logan books onto the deer-rich Wasatch-Cache National Forest and offers super waterfowl hunting on the Bear River Refuge.
  - **Fairbanks, AK (29):** Located between the Sierra Nevada and Warner mountains, this cozy valley town is within easy reach of deer, elk, duck and grouse hunting. Trout are abundant just outside of town, and bass, steelhead and salmon are within an easy drive.

**Pacific Coast**

- **Suisun Bay, CA (39):** The easy reach of all the big-game hunting Alaska has to offer, plus arctic grayling, salmon, burbot and even northern pike close to town.
  - **Klamath Falls, OR (39):** Possibly the best waterfowl hunting in the U.S., thanks to the basin’s marshes and shallow lakes, this southern Oregon town boasts still-water trout and epic wing-shooting for quail, grouse and chukar.

**Pocatello, Idaho**

**College Town with a Trout Bum’s Soul**

**Fishable Species:** B  
**Huntable Species:** A-  
**Public-Land Proximity:** B+  
**Trophy Potential:** B  
**Gun Laws:** A-

**Main Draws:** Easy drive to elk, mule deer and waterfowl hunting, plus trophy trout in the spring creeks of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. American Falls Reservoir—the largest reservoir in Idaho—offers a neglected perch fishery and football-size rainbows. The Portneuf River, right in Pocatello, allows residents to catch a trout after work.

**Population:** 53,932  
**Median Home Price:** $96,700

**Amenities:** Its location at the hub of interstates 86 and 15—about halfway between Yellowstone Park and Salt Lake City—provides easy access to the West. The Idaho State University community enriches the arts and nightlife.

**Bottom Line:** This is the ultimate hometown trout town. You can raise a family and hold a job without reducing your days on the water.

**Info:** pocatelloidaho.com

**Newtown Lakes just north of town, and in Buffalo Reservoir just up the Shoshone River**, **located just outside of town.**

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**Info:** pocatelloidaho.com
FROM THIS CENTRAL MONTANA TOWN, a quarter tank of gas puts you in elk timber, pheasant-rich sloughs and spring-fed trout water. Antelope, black bear, wild turkeys and impressive numbers of both whitetails and mule deer are visible from the hills above town. Drive a little farther and you’re into bighorn sheep, walleyes and even prehistoric paddlefish in the vast Missouri River Breaks. Lewistown is not only in the center of Montana; it’s at the center of a galaxy of hunting destinations. And the town has managed to preserve its mix of historic authenticity, affordability and small-town charm. Four mountain ranges run the horizon around town, and Montana’s High Plains roll off their foothills. The diverse landscape creates abundant opportunities for varmint hunting.

“The coolest thing about living here,” says Dave Snyder at Don’s Sporting Goods. “There’s so much to do just outside of town that if you’re a hunter or a fisherman, there’s never a downtime.” Blue-ribbon Big Spring Creek flows right at least a mile’s glassed-over bar in downtown Lewistown, letting you gaze at trout while you enjoy a libation.

MAIN DRAWS: Its central location amid a diverse landscape of prairie, grassy foothills and timbered mountains.

POPULATION: 6,083

MEDIAN HOME PRICE: $75,400

AMENITIES: Lewistown is a favorite conviction spot due to its location and abundant facilities. The town big enough to have essential services, but small enough to remain affordable.

BOTTOM LINE: Million-dollar views on a blue-collar budget, and a dizzying diversity of activities.

INFO: lewistownchamber.com

Bottom line: Affordable access to a full spectrum of hunting

FISHABLE SPECIES: B- HUNTABLE SPECIES: A- PUBLIC-LAND PROXIMITY: B- TROPHY POTENTIAL: B- GUN LAWS: A-

Amenities:

- One of the best salmon and steelhead towns in the nation is hundreds of miles from the ocean. Just outside this thriving college town in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, anglers cast to surly chinooks, chrome-bright steelhead and colorful lake-run brown trout. Inland anglers prospect dozens of rivers for trophy brook trout, and woodland lakes hold walleyes, pike, whitefish and crappies.

- But Marquetteters save their vacation time for deer season and whether the fish. Bears, ruffed grouse, ducks, coyotes and turkeys provide plenty of hunting days on the Hwahtwa and Ottawa national forests and smallwooded areas of the area.

- “The coolest thing about living here is the public access,” says fishing guide Brad Pezke. “I fish hundreds of miles of rivers every year, and because of our liberal stream laws, there are only a few spots you can’t access.”

MAIN DRAWS: Huge diversity of fish, from native brookies to rainbows and lake-run brown trout to steelhead, salmon, lake trout, walleyes and pike.

POPULATION: 20,488

MEDIAN HOME PRICE: $112,200

AMENITIES: The Upper Peninsula’s largest medical center, Northern Michigan University and thriving retail and arts scenes are here.

BOTTOM LINE: Trout share space with smallmouths in the U.P.’s pristine streams, and more than 100 lakes are accessible within a half-hour of downtown Marquette. The deer opener is a like a national holiday here, drawing hunters from all over the region.

INFO: marquettecounty.org

no. 12
Marquette
MICHIGAN

THE UNDISPUTED CAPITAL OF THE U.P.

FISHABLE SPECIES: B+ HUNTABLE SPECIES: B+ PUBLIC-LAND PROXIMITY: B+ TROPHY POTENTIAL: B+ GUN LAWS: B-

Trophy Trout and Trophy Elk, Without Trophy Home Prices

FISHABLE SPECIES: B- HUNTABLE SPECIES: A- PUBLIC-LAND PROXIMITY: B+ TROPHY POTENTIAL: B+ GUN LAWS: A-

America’s Top 10 Whitetail Towns

KIRKSVILLE, MO: Magnum whitetails roam woodlots and WMA’s. ORORFINO, ID: Public-land bucks in deer-rich Clearwater River Valley. ARCADIA, WI: Next door to famed Buffalo County, but with the pressure. UNION CITY, TN: Whitetails grow wild in Mississippi Valley swamps and hardwood bottomland. BARRE, MA: Bucks grow big in Barre Falls WMA in stone-fence country. GUTHRIE, TX: Paradise bucks thrive between Wichitas and Brazos rivers. PARSONS, KS: Oak woods meet the tallgrass prairie in Kansas’ south-eastern corner. CLANTON, AL: Piney woods to the east, deer-rich Talaguppa National Forest to the west. SEDINY, MT: Beef-field bucks find security cover in eastern cotton bottom. WAYNESBORO, VA: Public land meets antler-growing in the Shenandoah Valley.

“Our methodology: How we determined the rankings

Months of research went into compiling our list of the top 200 towns for sportsmen in America. We started by combing through every population center in the United States with more than 4,000 people. We gathered comprehensive data on the overall quality of life the towns offered. Some of the factors we considered were the growth rate of the local economy, the unemployment rate, the degree of taxation, the time it takes to commute to work, the crime rate, housing prices, median household income and even the variety of cultural opportunities within easy driving distance.

Then we looked at how the towns stacked up purely from a sport- ing perspective the grades for some of the categories are listed with each of our top 10 profiles). We rated them on the fishing and hunting opportunities each town offers, the trophy quality of the sporting opportunities, proximity to public land, the restrictiveness of the gun laws, the fishing and hunting is good year-round.

We put all this into a massive database and developed a forula that gives slightly heavier emphasis (60/40) to the sporting opportunities than to the quality-of-life rankings. – John B. Snow
to cold-water and warm-water habitats. Page 10 draws: sheep and canyon-country muleys live to the West, and trophy antelope, desert deer, black bears and turkeys, is an hour miles of great fishing for rainbow trout. On the other side of the bottom-release bass, walleyes, catfish and crappies. tion of towering Glen Canyon Dam. The striped bass by morning and dainty midge boat, and casts frozen anchovies to huskyangler has both a bass boat and a drift
Po. To housebo Ts and river rafts
Great Plains Walleys, Rosysters, Geese, Ducks
FISHABLE SPECIES: B = HUNTEABLE SPECIES: B = PUBLIC-LAND PROXIMITY: A - TROPHY POTENTIAL: B - GUN LAWS: A
WATER IS THE LIFE BLOOD OF THE GREAT
Plains, and around Bismarck it’s also the playground. Public boat docks provide access to the Missouri River’s cool-water fishery in town, and world-class wa-

toweling is legendary.

Rounding out the Top 200
11 Richfield, UT
12 Logan, UT
13 Livingston, MT
14 Fort Collins, CO
15 Cedar City, UT
16 Helena, MT
17 Rifle, CO
18 Williston, ND
19 Bemidji, MN
20 Rogers, AR
21 Casper, WY
22 Boonville, MO
23 Vernal, UT
24 Flagstaff, AZ
25 Seneca, SC
26 Show Low, AZ
27 Los Alamos, NM
28 Durango, CO
29 Susanville, CA
30 Butte, MT
31 Fairbanks, AK (tie)
32 Coeur d’Alene, ID (tie)
33 Klamath Falls, OR

More on outdoorlife.com
Now we want to hear from you! Tell us how your town rates and let us know which sportmen’s paradises we missed. You can contribute online at outdoorlife.com. While you’re there, check out the full chart that shows the scores in each category for all 200 cities.