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ABOVE: High school interns gather dragonfly larvae in Chasteen Creek in Great Smoky Mountains National Park near Cherokee, to collect data for the Dragonfly Mercury Project in 2014. PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
TOP LEFT: Dragonfly larvae like this one are fierce predators, using internal hydraulic pressure and a special prehensile structure called a labium to capture everything from mosquito larvae to small fish. PROVIDED BY M. REILLY, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Dragonflies are indicators of mercury pollution



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

With 360-degree vision, bright-colored bodies that sparkle jewel-like in the sun, and acrobatic flight patterns reaching speeds of nearly 35 miles per hour, dragonflies are some of the more

glamorous members of the insect world. But they're also reservoirs of mystery. In just the past five years, Great Smoky Mountains National Park has added five new species to its list of 101 resident members of the Odonata order, which includes 70 dragonflies as well as 31 species of their cousins, the damselflies. Recent research has revealed that some species of these enigmatic

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The blue dasher, *Pachydiplax longipennis*, is one of 70 species of dragonflies found in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY EMMA OXFORD

Mercy Urgent Care recognized for Helene response

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mercy Urgent Care has been honored as the recipient of the Urgent Care Association's 2025 Humanitarian Award for its service to the Western North Carolina community in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene. Each year, UCA, the trade association for urgent care professionals, acknowledges the work of those advancing patient-centered health care through its Urgent Care Awards. The annual Humanitarian Award recognizes an individual or organization whose significant medical volunteer work has had a positive impact on a national or international cause or event. In honoring Mercy Urgent Care with this award, UCA commends the non-profit's leadership and dedication in providing relief to communities across the region in the wake of the natural disaster brought on by Tropical Storm Helene.

"I am honored to accept the Urgent Care Association's 2025 Humanitarian Award on behalf of our Mercy team," said Mercy president and CEO Rachel Sossoman. "Their efforts in the wake of the hurricane provided a critical lifeline for Western North Carolina when it was needed the most, and they did this work even as they suffered their own losses. They are extraordinary individuals whose commitment to serving others changes lives, including mine, for the better every day." When Tropical Storm Helene devastated WNC last fall and many local health care organizations were forced to close due to lack of access and utilities, the Mercy team was determined to continue serving the community. Although many Mercy facilities had no running water, staff worked quickly to reopen the clinics — setting up portable bathrooms in parking lots and water distribution stations in centers — to ensure Mercy remained

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Trump ends tour with AI, energy deals

UAE agrees to purchase U.S. semiconductors

Nayera Abdallah, Yousef Saba and Federico Maccioni
REUTERS

DUBAI — President Donald Trump said May 16 on his last stop on a Middle East tour focused on business deals that the United Arab Emirates and the United States had agreed a path for the Persian Gulf country to buy advanced

artificial intelligence semiconductors from U.S. companies, a major win for Abu Dhabi's efforts to become a global AI hub. Trump also wrapped up his Gulf tour of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE with a pledge by oil power Abu Dhabi — the UAE's capital and richest emirate — to boost the value of its energy investments in the U.S. to \$440 billion in the next decade.

Trump departed for Washington

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President Donald Trump visits the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on May 16 during the final stop of his Middle East visit. PHOTOS BY BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS



MOUNTAINS

US News & World Report: NC just outside top 10 states to live in

Iris Seaton
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Rankings for how the Carolinas serve their citizens among those for all 50 states in the country were wildly different, according to a new report.

U.S. News & World Report’s website calls the company a “multifaceted digital media company dedicated to helping consumers, business leaders and policy officials make important decisions in their lives.” Using data and technology, the publication issues reporting and rankings on subjects from education to money to travel and beyond.

A list of “best state rankings” from U.S. News drew on thousands of data points to measure how well states are “performing for their citizens.” Rankings take into account things like health care, education, economy and public safety, weighting the categories based on a survey of what matters most to people.

Here’s what the report said about the Carolinas, the top 10 states in the country and more.

Is North Carolina a good place to live?

North Carolina came up just a few rankings short of making the U.S. News top 10 at No. 13 overall. The report gave the state the following rankings out of the 50 states in various overall categories studied:

- **Crime and Corrections** - No. 25
- **Economy** - No. 7
- **Education** - No. 12
- **Fiscal Stability** - No. 14
- **Health Care** - No. 25



The aptly named Great Smoky Mountains unfurl from the view at Kuwohi, formerly known as Clingmans Dome. PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS

- **Infrastructure** - 32
- **Natural Environment** - 26
- **Opportunity** - 18

North Carolina median income; is North Carolina expensive?

According to U.S. News, the median household income in N.C. is \$70,804, while the national average is \$76,976. The poverty rate in N.C. sits slightly higher than the national average, 12.8% to 12.2%.

The state ranks No. 10 in long-term fiscal stability, and No. 26 in short-term fiscal stability.

North Carolina economy

Of the eight categories compiled for each state, N.C. made it into the top10 of only one category: economy.

Job growth was measured at 2.6% throughout N.C. compared to 1.4% countrywide, and net migration is 1.4% compared to only 0.06% nationwide.

Is South Carolina a good place to live?

While N.C. nearly made it into the top 10 states on the U.S. News list, its neighbor, South Carolina, was on the opposite end of the spectrum, ranking at No. 40

in the country. The report gave the state the following rankings out of the 50 states in various overall categories studied:

- **Crime and Corrections** - 42
- **Economy** - 14
- **Education** - 43
- **Fiscal Stability** - 20
- **Health Care** - 30
- **Infrastructure** - 36
- **Natural Environment** - 21
- **Opportunity** - 42

South Carolina median income; Is South Carolina expensive?

According to U.S. News, the median household income in S.C. is \$67,804, while the national average is \$76,976. The poverty rate in S.C. sits almost two percentage points above the national average, 13.9% to 12.2%.

Though the state ranks at No. 28 in long-term fiscal stability, its short-term stability is significantly higher at No. 7.

Best states in the U.S.

The 10 best states from U.S. News:

1. Utah
2. New Hampshire
3. Idaho
4. Minnesota
5. Nebraska
6. Florida
7. Vermont
8. South Dakota
9. Massachusetts
10. Washington

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Dragonflies

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creatures migrate more than 400 miles in their search for suitable breeding grounds.

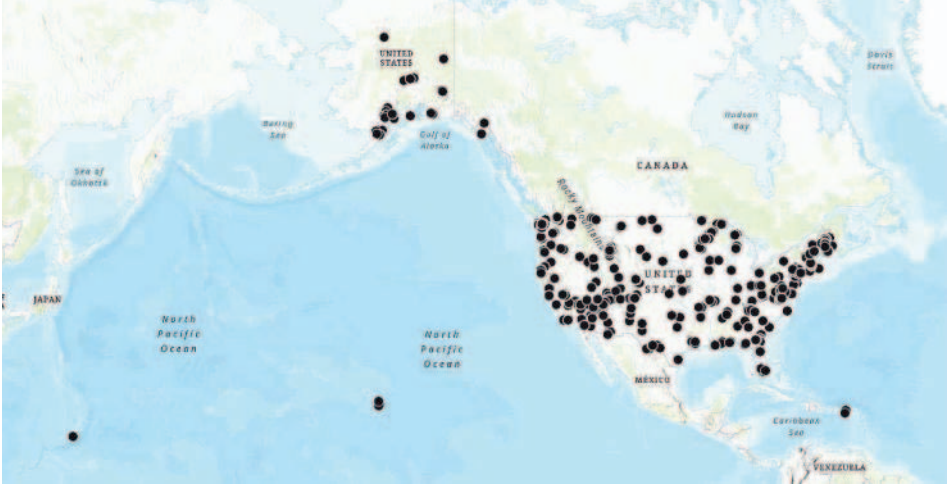
“They’re also an important link in the food chain,” said Becky Nichols, the park’s entomologist. “Other things prey on them, but they prey on smaller things.”

This characteristic makes dragonflies invaluable indicators of mercury pollution. In an expansive study underway since 2011, the Dragonfly Mercury Project, a collaboration between the National Park Service and U.S. Geological Survey, has sampled dragonfly larvae at nearly 1,000 sites scattered from the South Pacific to the United States–Canada border, seeking to better understand how mercury contamination affects this varied landscape. But the project started with the cooperation of just four parks in the eastern U.S. — and Great Smoky Mountains National Park was one of them.

The Smokies’ extensive commitment to scientific discovery — through collaboration with professional scientists and enthusiastic community members — made it a “no brainer” to include the park in the pilot program, said project co-lead Colleen Flanagan Pritz, an ecologist for the NPS Air Resources Division.

Mercury is a heavy metal that acts as a neurotoxin, and high concentrations can cause symptoms ranging from peripheral vision loss to walking, speech and hearing impairment. If exposed in the womb, children can face disabilities in vital areas such as cognitive thinking and fine motor skills. Though mercury can enter the environment through natural sources like volcanoes and geothermal springs, in the last 150 years human activities such as coal combustion, waste incineration, industry and mining have caused atmospheric mercury to more than double.

But before it can become harmful to humans, mercury must be converted by



Since 2011, the Dragonfly Mercury Project has expanded to include more than 180 National Park Service sites scattered from Guam to the U.S.–Canada border.

PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

microorganisms like bacteria from the inorganic form found in polluted air to methylmercury, an organic molecule that living things can absorb. Once consumed, methylated mercury never leaves an animal’s body, and it accumulates in higher levels up the food chain as predators consume contaminated prey.

Since 2019, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation has placed a precautionary fish consumption advisory on smallmouth bass in Abrams Creek and Little River due to mercury concerns. But regularly testing bass and other game species residing in the 2,900 miles of streams flowing through the park is expensive and time-consuming. Because they’re so much easier to capture and cheaper to test, dragonfly larvae are gaining recognition as an answer to this monitoring conundrum.

“They’ve emerged as a Rosetta Stone, where we’re able to take mercury in dragonflies and translate that into what it means for other organisms,” said project co-lead Collin Eagles-Smith, a supervisory research ecologist for the U.S. Geological Survey Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center in Corvallis, Oregon. “That can be particularly effective

if you’re worried about species that are threatened or endangered, because you don’t have to actually handle or sample them — you can use dragonflies as a proxy.”

Unlike adult dragonflies, larvae are relatively easy to capture and tend not to move around much. Fierce predators, dragonfly larvae use internal hydraulic pressure and a special prehensile structure called a labium to capture everything from mosquito larvae to small fish. These characteristics make them ideally suited to indicate how much mercury is contained in the creatures sharing their pond or stream segment during this often multi-year stage of development.

The Dragonfly Mercury Project has grown from four parks to include more than 180 national parks and protected places across nearly 1,000 sampling sites, with over 8,500 citizen scientists contributing data. In the Smokies, more than 300 specimens have been submitted from 13 different sites on 25 different occasions, collected by the entomology and fisheries teams as well as by participants in the park’s annual high school internship program.

“We’ve used this project to look at a lot of different questions,” said Paul Su-



A dragonfly emerges from its larval exoskeleton. Within hours, its wings will be capable of carrying its body through fast, complex flight patterns.

PROVIDED BY RICHARD TOLLER VIA FLICKR

per, science coordinator for the Smokies. “When we had the Chimney Tops 2 fire, we collected dragonflies downstream of areas that burned that year just to see if mercury might peak, which I don’t believe it did. We looked at streams that were EPA-listed as being out of compliance because of atmospheric deposition, so we were curious if the mercury would be higher there. We’ve looked at streams that have had fish advisories. We’ve also looked at some streams over multiple years of this project to see if there is a change.”

Of the 25 different sampling sites in the Smokies, 21 (84%) yielded a result of moderate mercury risk, meaning that mercury could harm people who eat fish, fish-eating birds and fish, and insect-eating fish. Three sampling sites (12%) showed low contamination, and one sampling site (4%) showed a high effect range. Those results indicate a greater risk of contamination in the

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Dragonflies

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Smokies than the average across the entire project, but a lower risk than in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, where the other pilot sites are located.

“We don’t have as big a problem as we might, but we’re not free of mercury in our food webs,” Super said. “That’s the message we’re getting, is that we need to keep monitoring, be vigilant, and possibly change fish consumption advisories if conditions call for that.”

However, much remains unknown about mercury risk in the Smokies and how to prevent it. By analyzing data from the National Atmospheric Deposition Program, which monitors mercury deposition in the Smokies, the Dragonfly Mercury Project team found that reductions in inorganic mercury deposition don’t always correspond to a reduction in toxic methylmercury found in dragonflies.

“That could be because there’s some process in the environment that either is enhancing the conversion into methylmercury or preventing it from happening,” Eagles-Smith said. “And so it can be really difficult to determine how much of that incoming mercury ends up within a food web.”

Flanagan Pritz and Eagles-Smith hope to see the Dragonfly Mercury Project continue to gather new data and expand to additional sites, offering improved insight into what drives methylmercury accumulation in the food web.

“By having a vast dataset across the country in different types of environments, we’ve been able to build a model that can actually predict how much mercury is going to be in a habitat based on its environmental characteristics,” said Eagles-Smith.

Adding new data to that model will help scientists better understand how changes in inorganic mercury deposition impacts the prevalence of toxic methylmercury in different habitats. But that’s not their only strategy.

The Dragonfly Mercury Project team also wants to conduct more extensive simultaneous collection of fish and dragonfly larvae samples, producing robust data that will help them better refine models that use dragonfly data to predict fish mercury concentrations. Meanwhile, newly available analytical tools let the team “fingerprint” various



A recently shed dragonfly larva exoskeleton sits in water. Depending on the species, this can happen somewhere between 6-18 times before the creature reaches its final size and prepares for emergence in its adult form.

PROVIDED BY TOM BRANDT VIA FLICKR

forms of mercury, showing how deposition varies in different environments — as rain or snow in dry areas, for example, or as a gas in wet forests — and with potential to indicate whether contamination is coming directly from precipitation, from industrial activity, or due to release following long-term storage in the soil. These insights will offer the clearest picture yet on which actions might be most effective at reducing contamination.

It might be hard to believe so much information could be contained in these glittering, slender creatures that flit around ponds and riversides. But there is more to dragonflies than meets our far inferior human eyes.

“They’re cool organisms, and they’re helping us to better understand this potentially serious pollution issue,” Super said. “More power to dragonflies.”

To learn more about the Dragonfly Mercury Project, visit nps.gov/subjects/citizenscience/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm. Help conserve dragonflies by taking action to prevent water contamination and leaving the edges of any water bodies near your home or business natural and unmowed.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column.



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