



# FISH FEVER

FIRST-GRADER JAMES LUCE BRINGS  
BOUNDLESS ENTHUSIASM AND BUDDING  
SKILLS TO HIS FAVORITE PASTIME  
BY WILLIAM SISSON





James Luce is all focus as he hooks a plastic bait to a trolling rig. The first-grader has caught plenty of freshwater stripers, many of them at night.

TODD ANDREW PHILLIPS

COURTESY WADE LUCE

**At 8 years old,** James Luce is all smiles, teeth and energy, a fishing whirlwind happily focused on catching another fish worthy of a video for his YouTube channel. For the last three years, his life has revolved around fish: freshwater stripers, largemouth bass, catfish and plenty more.

"It's fishing over anything," says his 59-year-old father, Wade Luce, of Peoria, Arizona, who trailers the 17-foot family fishboat, takes video of his son's catches and commentary, and somehow finds time to coach James' baseball team. His 17-year-old sister Gaby edits and posts her brother's videos. James also has a 4-year-old sister, Samantha, who occasionally appears in his videos.

When Wade was his son's age, he was as crazy about baseball as his son is over fish. James plays third base for the Peoria Reds, but his true love is chasing fish. "Baseball is a distant second," his father says. (In the spirit of full disclosure, Wade is a group publisher for Active Interest Media, which publishes *Anglers Journal* and other magazines.)

In a YouTube video taken with his father's cellphone in early January, James recapped the year just finished. "Alright guys, this is a wrap for 2023," he says in his high-pitched voice, smiling as he rocks back and forth on the bow. "I got 27 species and 1,104 fish this year, and I only fished 104 days."

He raises both hands to slap the sides of his cap as if he, too, is surprised by his totals. "And I thought I was going to fish 200 or something. I had a super fun year, and next year, I hope I catch 2,000 fish." With that, James breaks into what he calls his "fish dance," a handful of enthusiastic jumping jacks. "And I got 18 today," he notes.

Truth is, his 2023 catch failed to include the 207 bluegills he'd cranked in because his father doesn't feel panfish measure up in difficulty to the bass, stripers and catfish his son regularly lands. The



fishing prodigy disagrees. "My dad didn't count them, but he should have," says James, who is in first grade. "They're fish!"

The angling seed germinating inside James bloomed when his family moved from Los Angeles to Arizona three years ago during the Covid pandemic. There were a few signs even in L.A. that this skinny kid might have inherited a bit of Izaak Walton's devotion to piscatorial pursuits. One story recounts James' first trip to a reservoir in California when he was just 4 years old. James skipped the push-button Zebco phase and opted directly for a spinning rod and reel.

That toddler fished chunks of hot dog on circle hooks and caught a largemouth bass and a few turtles, which shows how the fish gods work in mysterious ways. "That was my first fish," James says proudly. He has come a long way since his frankfurter days.

Despite his age, James knows his knots, including one for joining





braid and mono, spools line onto his reels and has learned to mark his line for jigging or trolling at specific depths. He casts smoothly and doesn't horse his fish in. He is comfortable tossing lures with a baitcasting reel. He dabbles with a fly rod. He loves fishing nights for stripers and catfish. You can watch him on video lippping a 6-pound largemouth as gracefully as his father fielded grounders as a boy.

Given that fathers are not necessarily the most objective observers of their sons, two guides with whom James has fished were consulted for this story, and both freely acknowledged that the boy with the "contagious smile" is unique for his age in terms of concentration, persistence and the ability to follow instructions.

All agree that there is "no quit" in James when he's got a fishing rod in his hand. Weather? It doesn't deter him. James caught a 20-inch rainbow in a snowstorm on Silver Creek in Arizona when he was 5. And he's fished in temperatures as high as 117 degrees. "He gets bored if he's not catching fish, but he never quits," Wade says. "He sticks it out. He's a trooper."

One of James' favorite things is fishing for stripers at night. "Quite often," his father reports, "I'm asking myself, *Why are we the only boat out here?*"

"He'll never quit," says Gary Senft, 71, a tournament bass angler and guide who counts among his longtime sponsors Bass Pro Shops, where he gives seminars. "I take a lot of kids fishing. James just turned 8. He's the only 7- or 8-year-old who will fish 100 percent for six hours." Most kids who are James' age can focus for about a half-hour, the guide says. "James listens to you, and he focuses on what you tell him to do. That's why he's as good as he is. He's very aggressive, he learns fast, and he wants to learn more. He loves the sport."

Just how good is he? Senft pauses for a moment. "The kid catches a lot more fish than his dad," he says good-naturedly.

Wade couldn't be happier. "His passion is just awesome," says the proud father, who has driven his son to Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and California to fish. "Keeps me young."



*The young fishing fanatic has caught his share of chunky largemouths. Arizona guide Rick Phillips shows James something of interest on the fishfinder.*

James' enthusiasm is a balm for adult anglers who have fished with him or viewed his videos, perhaps carrying them back to their own wistful fishing roots. He is a likeable kid who relates well with his peers and adults. The principal of his school has even shared some of his fish jokes over the morning intercom. "He's a good boy ... such a funny kid," Senft says.

COURTESY WADE LUCE (LEFT)

TODD ANDREW PHILLIPS

"His dad has taken him to almost every lake in Arizona," says Rick Phillips, who is 52 and runs fishing charters on Lake Pleasant, James' home lake. "He'll go any time you'll take him."

Growing up in Washington, Wade fished for trout as a kid before discovering baseball, cars and the usual youthful attractions. After that, he bid fishing adieu. For more than 30 years, Wade had a pair

of Penn Power Sticks collecting cobwebs in his basement — now there are more than 40 rods and reels down there. "It might be more. I'm afraid to count," he says. "I've learned, don't take him with you into the fishing store." Sometimes the store comes to him. Senft surprised James by showing up at his eighth birthday party with a new baitcasting outfit.



Phillips, the Lake Pleasant guide, helped get James and his father dialed in to the stripers on that lake. In the process, they've become friends. He too is enamored with the young angler's ability to fish different techniques and figure things out on his own. "He puts two and two together," says Phillips, who runs Arizona Sport Fishing Charters. "He counts out his line. He uses a lot of different techniques. That's cool."

On New Year's Day this year, Phillips says, James outfished both him and his father, hauling in six stripers to their one each. "He can hold his own against any adult I fish with," says Phillips, who has been chartering for seven years. "He has the skills. He casts fluidly, and he can tie the knots. You can't keep him off the lake."

James loves to fish what his father has dubbed "double-headers," meaning fishing two lakes in one long day. Saturdays during summer often find father and son rolling out of the house at 4:30 a.m. James sleeps the 1½-hour ride to Bartlett Lake. The pair are on the water by 6 and fish for largemouth until about 2 p.m.

The first stop after fishing is Dairy Queen, where James orders a Blizzard, which he polishes off before sleeping the rest of the way home. Wade often leaves his son snoozing in the truck parked in the driveway as he switches out largemouth tackle for striper gear. Then it's back out, this time to Lake Pleasant, which is only 15 minutes from their house. They launch the boat again and fish from about 5 p.m. until 9 p.m. or later. "Dad, the taxi driver, gets no sleep," says Wade, who clearly doesn't mind. "His passion is just awesome."

James' YouTube videos have raised his profile on his home waters, and he is regularly recognized on Lake Pleasant. "He's become like a little celebrity," Wade says. "A day doesn't go by without someone hollering at us, 'Go James, go!'" James had 3,400 subscribers to his YouTube channel, which will likely be up to 4,000 by the time you read this. He has posted 400 videos. Will he catch 2,000 fish this year? All bets are off, but he's gotten off to a good start.

On a Tuesday near the end of January, Wade clarified some of his son's recent catches — unsurprisingly, the two had fished for a couple of hours in the rain the previous night. "OK guys, it's time to go home when you're the only truck in the parking lot," James pronounced on his video report from the boat ramp. "And we got 11 fish today, and it's raining, and I better go home now. Stay tuned."

They called it quits around 7:30 p.m. "School night," Wade says. Last summer, Wade took his family to Florida, which opened James' eyes to a new world. He promptly caught a 5-pound jack crevalle in Fort Pierce and some peacock bass in Plantation. On a charter in the Keys, he and his dad fought a 60-plus-pound tarpon. James, who tips the scales at 45 pounds, also landed a nurse shark estimated at 40 pounds.

Smitten by the variety and size of the fish with which he tangled, James lobbied his father to consider the virtues of moving to Florida. "Dad, we could live here," James sang out from time to time. "We could just live here!"

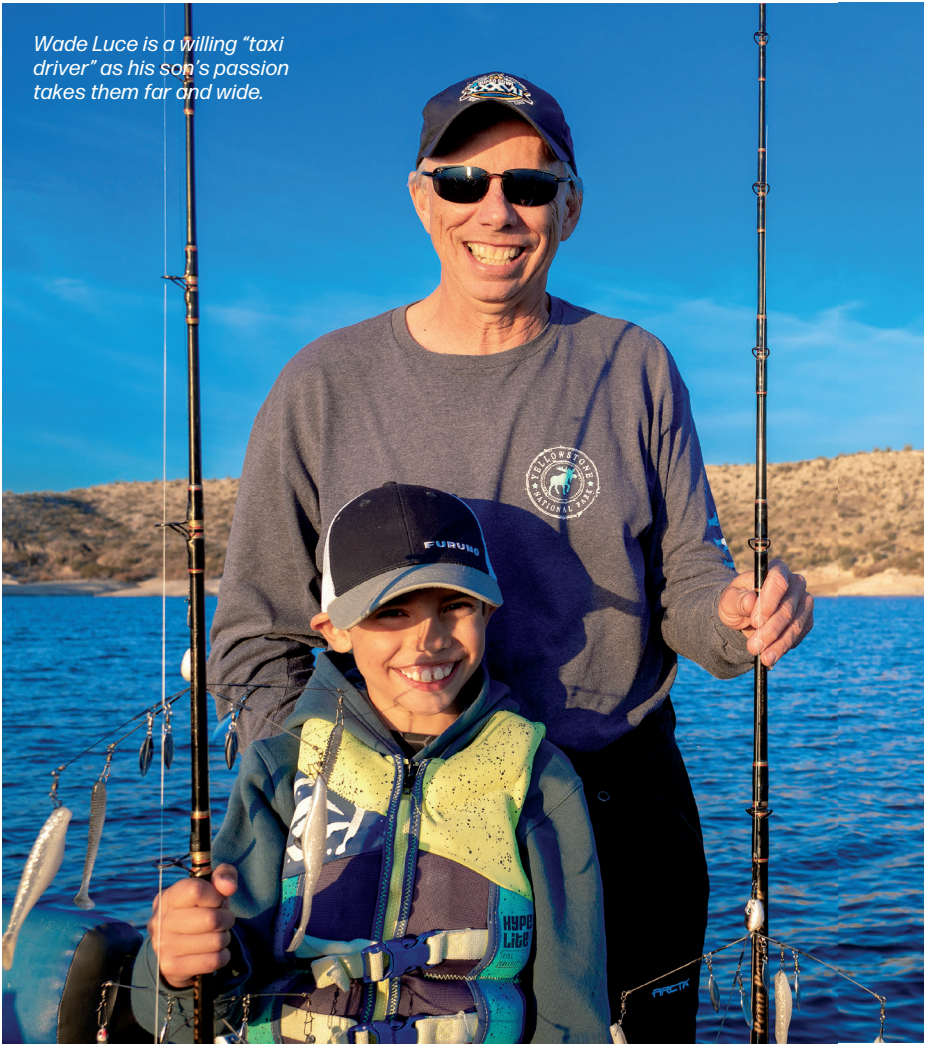
Channel cats are James' favorite fish, with freshwater stripers a close second. Why catfish? "I like how they make little grunty noises," James says. "And the whiskers are kind of cool, too. And they fight pretty well." What better reasons?

When he was 5, James caught a 20-pound catfish on a crankbait in Last Chance Canyon on Lake Powell. He also caught a pair of 15-pounders last year. He finds largemouth bass the most challenging to hook, although he's taken his share of them, including a pair of 6-pounders last season. His largest striper weighed 9 pounds.

Where will it all end? You can never really tell. "The kid is 100 percent into it," Phillips says. "He's pretty much into all of it. If he stays with it, he'll probably be a professional someday." 🐟



Variety helps keep a kid interested: (clockwise) catfish, largemouth, jack crevalle, peacock bass, brown trout and white bass.



Wade Luce is a willing "taxi driver" as his son's passion takes them far and wide.



TODD ANDREW PHILLIPS (BOTTOM LEFT), COURTESY WADE LUCE (6)

