



Swimming with dinosaurs

The bichirs are as ancient as they are odd looking. Existing over millions of years, they now face their greatest threat — change.

Joshua Pickett | The Bichir Handbook

IT IS the late Cretaceous Period in what will eventually become North Africa. Drifting helplessly through the warm currents of an ancient river is a single small egg, spherical in shape and no larger than the thickness of a penny. Its parents were hardly attentive; they abandoned a multitude of eggs the moment they scattered them into the river's marginal plants. They didn't give much care as to how carefully they did so. There are dangerous animals in the margins, animals that come here for nothing more than hunting.

It's the ages-old evolutionary dilemma — why risk your own life protecting a few eggs, when you can just fertilise and disperse hundreds at once, abandoning them to the ravages of fate? Besides, the plants at this river's edge provide shelter. More, they carry a natural gift; an abundance of insect larvae to eat, the ideal larder for this couple's hungry, hatching progeny.

Above: *Polypterus bichir lapradei* and *Polypterus senegalus*, two modern bichir species.

Illustration: Dorian Noel