

GEAR

TRIED &
TESTEDBRITAIN'S HIDDEN FISHES,
BY JACK PERKS

Reviewed by: Joshua Pickett

Price: Last screening is free, with requested donations

I've pondered for a long time what hold our seas, rivers and lakes have over us. What draws us to them, time and time again? For each of us, I'm sure the answer is a little different, but the instigator for me was the mystery. Despite covering over 70% of the planet's surface, these environments are supremely private places; not knowing what lies beneath has always excited me.

When I went to see a screening of *Britain's Hidden Fishes* in Falmouth, Cornwall, some of that secrecy was uncovered. I realised the reality was far more captivating than I imagined.

Britain's Hidden Fishes is a crowdfunded documentary film directed by professional 'fish twitcher' Jack Perks, who aimed to showcase British marine and freshwater fishes as never seen before. Raising the £30,000 needed to produce the film (a paltry sum compared to the budgets of most documentaries), it still matches its contemporaries in quality. What sets this apart from other documentaries is that fishes are not an accident or afterthought—they are the star of the show.

Televisions have accustomed us to sympathising with furry animals in wildlife documentaries, but who among us have considered the tribulations of the twaite shad? One of over 40 species featured in Jack's film, this migratory fish is endangered in Britain, battling to reach its spawning grounds upstream in the Severn, thanks to the hazards of man-made obstacles. To reach its goal, the shad needs to wait for the tide to rise above lowland dams, resulting in the shoals bottlenecking in small, exposed areas—easy pickings for predators.

With Jeremy Wade narrating, scenes like this play out, the gravitas of his voice combined with a musical score that drives the imagery home.



Boasting an award-winning camera crew and over an hour of runtime, *Britain's Hidden Fishes* showcases the incredible journeys fishes make, and never-before-seen behaviour. Chalk streams, rivers, rock pools, canals, estuaries; this film has it all. Bitterling laying their eggs inside of live mussels, impatient grayling rummaging for early mayfly, and thick-lipped mullet having a spa day are among some of the more memorable moments.

There's an implicit environmental subtext, too, with the film showing how warming oceans are affecting our native fishes. Cold water species like cod are moving further north, and increasing numbers of Mediterranean species like grey triggerfish now call Britain their home. I witnessed this intimately, when Jack and I encountered the subtropical ringneck blenny during a visit to Cornwall, a species Jack noted wasn't present (at least in these numbers) when he'd lived there ten years prior. If the current warming trend continues, more subtropical species will continue to hit Cornwall and move further north.

That's not to say the documentary is doom-mongering. Rather, it balances entertainment and alarm. While there's no doubt that our waters are sparser of fauna than they have been in recent history,



the film highlights just a small part of the beautiful and exciting moments that still exist within them. Therein lies the reason a documentary such as this has never been made before, the dearth of even commonplace fishes makes it quite a challenge to film them underwater. At least with the rarer fishes, their locations and movements are usually tracked.

Out-of-sight, out-of-mind is the take-home message of *Britain's Hidden Fishes*, and it masterfully puts fishes in the forefront of our thoughts. This alone will not fix the state of our rivers and seas, but it takes those critical first strides in showing the general public, and more importantly, legislators that the hidden lives of fishes are strewn with their own relationships, challenges and tragedies.

You'll need to be quick to catch what remains of it. The last screening (including a Q&A session after with the director) of 2023 takes place on November 30th at Ouseburn Farm, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, hosted by Wild Intrigue. If that's cutting it too fine, Jack is in talks with the industry about showing the film on Channel 4. Fingers crossed.

