



Joshua's first ever bichir, a slender *P. bichir*.

Custodian of the Ancients

Into the world of Bichirs

An Interview with Joshua Pickett
 Author of The Bichir Handbook

Beginnings: A Childhood Beneath the Surface ▶▶▶▶

TWA: Can you take us back to the beginning - how did your journey into the aquarium hobby start, and what were your early influences?

JP: I think it starts off as a story familiar to so many other people, where interest began in my formative years, but rather than it being a curiosity which slowly developed, the obsession into aquatic life took hold of me immediately. I lived near floodplains of the River Avon, so after periods of heavy rain, the rivers would swell, and roads would occasionally flood, and I remember one morning, the water had receded somewhat, and I found a live frog resting in a puddle next to the curb as I was walking to school. Of course, I was too young to realise it probably ventured too far, or got displaced from the flooding, so every day since, when puddles would form, I would check them for frogs, frogspawn, and even fishes - a bit like a dog checking the same spot in a hedge every walk, as they found a ball in there once before.



Image credit: Joshua Pickett



I couldn't believe that the adults would just pass by disinterested, missing this experience; so I learned quite quickly that I should stop and look even more, in case I was missing something else too. I might've taken that to the next level, as when I started primary school, we had a nature pond in our playground. This was simultaneously the best and worst thing for me, as I spent most of every lunch break watching the pond from the fence, learning about the creatures I'd see, instead of socialising with my peers; hopscotch is cool and all, but did you know Pond skaters can walk on water?



Joshua's first aquarium (left) housing his newts, & (right) his loaches.

One of Joshua's first fishes, a Weather loach.

The mysteries of what lived below the surface of ponds and rivers was so captivating, and I was disappointed that life underwater seldom got attention on television; although that only stoked my obsession to discover those 'mysteries' even more. My school science class ran an RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) club, which I joined, not for the birds though, but for the river walks and surveys. While my class was looking up and around to spot kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*), I was peering down, into the margins of the river, spotting fishes, like Three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*), and Common minnows (*Phoxinus phoxinus*). I collected Wildlife Factfile binders which were published by International Masters Publishers in the 1990s, and I had filled at least four of them, to the point of swelling and bending the binder rings themselves. These taught me so much, and supplemented my observations from above the surface, but no matter how much you read a description of an animal's behaviour, there is no replacement to actually witnessing those behaviours yourself - I needed to see below the surface.

After a few trips to a nearby garden centre, I managed to convince my mother to buy me a small aquarium, but rather than fish, I started with some Chinese fire-bellied newts (*Cynops orientalis*), and then eventually I was allowed a second, slightly larger aquarium, which I stocked with Weather loaches (*Misgurnus anguillicaudatus*). I wish I could turn back time, knowing what I know now, to provide better care for them, however, both species I kept for over a decade (approx. 13 years), before I would gradually start to lose them to age when I was in my early 20s. Seeing the foraging behaviour of the newts, and the darting of the loaches, apparently predicting stormy weather, scratched an itch for me. It seemed, however, that this itch would come back, and would ultimately become unscratchable, as there is no end to what fish behaviours one might see.