

# Knives in!

The black ghost  
knife fish is a  
classic oddball.



It gets large and it's not without its challenges, but in the right tank the black ghost knife fish is an unrivalled centrepiece.



**JOSH PICKETT**

Designer and science communicator Josh is author of *The Bichir Handbook*.

**T**AKE YOURSELF BACK to your first visit to your local aquarium shop; the sound of bubbling water and a distinct smell of goldfish flakes in the warm air floods you with nostalgia. The awe and joy it left you with feeling as you went from tank to tank, face pressed to the glass, with so many fishes you'd never seen before. No doubt there was one fish that caught your eye. A prehistoric, deep black feather which moves like a ribbon pulled through the sky—the black ghost knife fish, *Apteronotus albifrons*. An unusual creature from the rivers of South America, which was entirely alien to you. This is not how fish are supposed to look, right?

#### Hello sparky!

By now, we all realise that fish come in all kinds of weird-and-wonderful shapes and sizes; after all, teleost fishes are the largest and most diverse group of vertebrates on the planet.

The black ghost is a porthole into a primeval world, belonging to Apterontidae (ghost knife fishes), a basal (early emerging) family of the order Gymnotiformes, commonly called the South American knife fishes, dating back to the late Jurassic/early Cretaceous.

Yet the black ghost knife fish is no relic; it is packing a biological super power it only relatively recently acquired (12.5mya). It can discharge electricity 2000 times a second—the fastest in the animal kingdom—thanks to a specialised electrical organ in the tail.