

One month with a Bird rental scooter: far worse than a bike

Riding down Market Street on my Bird scooter last month, wearing AirPods and staying out of the way of much faster-moving cyclists weaving around me as I chugged along at a painful 12 miles per hour, I began to think that maybe I was the problem.

I ride my bike to work. I've done so most days here in San Francisco over the last six years or so, and I know what all those cyclists are thinking: "Who is this tech bro doofus, obviously riding in the bike lane on a speed-capped scooter with poor braking capabilities? I hope he face plants." I've thought that many times about aggressive Boosted Board riders and daredevil OneWheel balance boarders and truly death wish-having individuals daring to use those InMotion electric unicycles. I've thought all of them are putting in an extreme amount of effort to avoid using a good old-fashioned bike.

Yet, little do my fellow cyclists know that while the AirPods are, in fact, mine (and I take full responsibility for that), the scooter is not. It's a rental, a monthly one to be precise. This being San Francisco, which has banned Bird until it jumps through the necessary regulatory hoops, this scooter wasn't picked up off the street. It was taken down the elevator in my apartment building where I store and charge it.

Bird's rental program lets it deploy its scooters in San Francisco where it doesn't have a permit

The rental is part of a new program the scooter company is trying out in San Francisco, Barcelona, and Miami. (The Florida city was added to the list earlier this month.) What makes San Francisco stand out, in particular, is that it's a

city where Bird hasn't blanketed the streets in dockless electric vehicles because it legally can't. As of June of this year, Bird owns scooter company Scoot, which is allowed here. But Scoot's presence remains relatively limited compared to the city's only other permit holder Skip, which accounted for 90 percent of all rides in the city over the past six months.

For Bird, the purpose of this monthly program is two-fold. It's an experiment with a different business model, considering its current one is starting to look fairly suspect. The company continues to bleed cash – it lost \$100 million in three months this year – trying to expand into new markets and drive down the cost it pays on each ride. The monthly program is also a way for Bird to boost its profile in the home of Silicon Valley, the birthplace of the ride-hailing movement from which it drew its inspiration, while it gets Scoot up to speed and, hopefully, convinces San Francisco to let it move in, too.

As someone who has found scooters to be quite useful, if a bit chaotically deployed, in destinations like Los Angeles and Austin, I thought it would be a great experiment to see how well Bird's monthly one fared as a daily transportation option here. After all, San Francisco is a small and dense enough city that scooters could make a huge difference, potentially encouraging an increasingly affluent base of tech industry commuters to ditch cars in favor of cleaner transportation.

Unfortunately, after using this Bird scooter for 30 days or so, I can confidently say my suspicions as a cyclist were more or less on the nose. I should just be using a bike because a bike is, in most cases, less annoying and faster than this particular model of Bird scooter. Also, a bike never runs out of batteries.

But the core issue runs deeper. Bird and its fellow electric scooter providers have experienced a meteoric rise because of a simple premise: a scooter you rent spontaneously for a short

period of time that you don't have to take care of or worry about when you're not riding it. A monthly program like this, where I'm encouraged to use it every day and liable for its well-being, injects all sorts of complications. It betrays the breezy, carefree pillar of the "micromobility" trend that is, effectively, Bird's core business.

I'd be singing a different tune if the scooter was better. In fact, if these scooters improved, the monthly rental program could become central to its growth. Bird is offering rentals for the low price of \$24.99 a month, but it's giving you a dinky, slow scooter with about 50 percent of the battery capacity of its standard dockless one. It's also capped at about 5 mph slower than those I was riding in LA just last month. Those LA scooters really cruised and made a strong case for Bird's presence in dense metropolitan areas where public transit is lacking and you often have to walk two to three miles to your destination.

I think I'd be singing a different tune if the scooter was better, like Bird's \$1,299 One unit

If you want the best scooter Bird provides, called the Bird One, you'll soon be able to buy one outright for \$1,299. That gets you a premium e-scooter with a 19 mph top speed, 30 miles of range, and a 220-pound max weight. If I could rent *that* scooter, even for as much as \$40 or \$50 a month, I would in a heartbeat. (The company is also developing its own moped.) Bird tells me that it currently offers "a few different models for personal rentals," but the one I have is the one advertised on the monthly program's website, and I have yet to see a different one around the city.

In most cases, scooters are a total blast to use and less strenuous than biking. They'll also get you where you need to be for less money than an Uber or Lyft ride – and at roughly the same cost as public transit. After all, scooters caught on because there are quite a few people out there who legitimately like riding them and see them as useful.

The Bird monthly rental scooter checks a lot of those boxes before you start to run up against the compromises. I found the process of having it delivered to be relatively seamless: a Bird employee locked it up in front of my apartment during a four-hour time slot during a predesignated delivery day. From there, you control the vehicle through the Bird app, scanning its barcode to activate it and using a built-in locking mechanism to free it from whatever it's tied to.

Those activation and locking mechanisms are kept separate. So you can choose to tell the app when the scooter is not locked to something, in the event you're keeping it in your apartment or garage, and you can still turn it on. That occasionally led to some weird app hiccups where Bird thought my scooter was on when it wasn't or unlocked when it was tethered to a bike rack. But most of the issues were fixed with an app reset, although that could take a frustrating amount of time when you needed to get somewhere fast. Occasionally, a bug in Bird's app would prevent me from unlocking the scooter, but that was relatively rare.

As far as riding goes, the Bird feels like a standard e-scooter, just slower. It did terribly on hills (as expected), and on downhill slopes, it seems to purposefully engage the electric brake to keep you from careening out of control, which is a nice safety touch I sometimes wish wasn't there so I could coast.

The biggest issue was the battery capacity, which lasted roughly two round trips to my office

The worst parts about the rental were its battery capacity and the act of physically lugging the thing around when I wasn't able to ride it. For instance, to get it into my apartment, I often have to keep the scooter activated. If you turn it off and you try to push it along the ground, the scooter will

incessantly beep at you as part of its anti-theft measures. It's not clear why this feature is deployed on these monthly scooters.

As a result, I'm pushing an activated scooter into an elevator, waiting until I get it into my apartment, and then turning it off. (Thankfully, the throttle won't kick in until you push off with your feet.) Only at that point can I actually plug it in to charge it. Getting the scooter out of my apartment, down some stairs, or up the hill next to my building (which it can't physically ride up because its motor is too weak) was equally frustrating.

The deal-breaker, however, is the battery. It lasts me, on average, about 7.5 to 8 miles on a charge. That means I could make the 2.2-mile ride to my office and back two days out of the week, and it would require a full overnight charge. If I decided to ride it anywhere else – to a friend's place or to run an errand – it would have about 30 percent left after just a day.

That's not so bad if you have somewhere to put it in your apartment every night, but I have a cluttered living room, and it wasn't easy to make space for it. My garage was also not an ideal environment to keep it in every night, charging and unlocked (our bike rack isn't close to an outlet), because I feared it would get stolen. We've had bikes stolen in the past, and Bird says you're on the hook for the full price of the scooter if it gets nabbed or suffers serious damage.

Bird hasn't done enough to justify why an e-scooter you can't pick up off the street is better than a bike

The company pointed me to a part of its rental FAQ that indicated that it would charge users up to \$500 for a lost or stolen scooter. Knowing that you're renting a scooter Bird considers to be worth \$500 is a good indication of the quality level of the device: solid but not great and perhaps on the level of one of those that nonetheless comes with much more

range and a higher top speed.

So is Bird's program worth it? At \$25 a month, it seems tantalizingly budget-conscious. And for those with short commutes who have no intention of ever biking and are just looking for a good alternative to public transit, it's better than relying on Uber or Lyft and surely faster than walking. But Bird hasn't done enough to justify why this scooter is necessary. You can't pick it up off the street or drop it off wherever you like, and there are so many other options, from bikes to public transit, that better solve the problem of needing to go a short distance quickly and cheaply.

When I found myself in my apartment building's garage recently, running a little bit late for work and thinking about the risky 40 or so percent battery level of my Bird rental, I decided to take my bike instead. It'd get me to work faster and wouldn't leave me stranded at the office at the end of the day. If Bird can start offering a monthly rental scooter that addresses those issues, I'll be the first to sign up.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/31/20747817/bird-electric-scooter-monthly-rental-san-francisco-bike-app-review>