Bird e-Bike and e-Scooter Share Review

By Tom Worthington

Part 1: Background

As of May 15th, Bird's flight of e-scooters and e-bikes have landed on the streets of Halifax, part of a two-year micromobility pilot project put on by the city. The decision to go with the American owned company has already stirred controversy, especially since it was chosen over the locally owned and operated HFX e-Scooters and MoVe Scooters.

Many cities around the world have seen the implementation of dockless e-scooter rentals with mixed results. Bird itself filed for bankruptcy in December 2023, only to re-emerge in April 2024 under a new parent company. Lime had its first profitable year in 2022, becoming the first micromobility company to ever achieve profitability.

Residents in cities where these services are introduced often express concern over the safety of pedestrians, the safety of the e-scooter users themselves, and the environmental impact and lifespan of the scooters and their lithium-ion batteries. Some have expressed their displeasure for e-scooters by throwing them into lakes, rivers, canals, and the ocean.

For context, I've ridden these e-scooters before. I rode a Lime e-scooter in Vancouver, in July 2021, after which I had to call customer service to get them to stop charging my credit card a monthly fee. I rode a Bird e-scooter twice in Ottawa, in July 2022. I rode a Lime e-bike in Paris, in February 2023, until I was side-swiped by an SUV's side mirror and decided it was best to see the city on foot.

For travelling, these offer a convenient way for getting around, but they're also one of the most expensive transportation options. I'm unable to access my ride history with Lime, but I still have my ride history with Bird. In Ottawa, my 8 minute, 960 meter trip cost $5.09. My 11 minute, 2 kilometer trip cost $6.52. That's $11.61 for a grand total of 2.96km, or 19 minutes. That's $3.92 per kilometer, or $0.61 per minute. For comparison, a day pass for public transit in Ottawa in July 2022 was $11.25 (it's now $12).

But it's been three years since then. Surely things have changed by now? To find out, I decided to commute using Bird: an e-scooter to work, and back home on an e-bike. The ride home had more hills, and I thought the bike might be more stable than the scooter. I also wanted to see how good the pedal assist was for managing hills.

Part 2: The Great Scooter Fiasco

The first challenge arose: figuring out the pricing on the app. It costs $1.00 to unlock a ride and $0.44 per minute thereafter. They also offer various passes, one of which is a 30 minute day pass, valid for 24 hours, which costs $8.99. I assume this price is without tax, but it doesn't say

anywhere in the app, which is a recurring theme: lack of pricing transparency. They also offer $3.99 plus tax ($4.55 total) for Bird+, a monthly subscription which advertises "free 30 minute reservations" and "free unlocks." You still have to pay $0.44 per minute after you unlock the bike. Since it costs $1 to unlock a ride, a subscription would pay for itself after 5 rides. Nowhere does it say how much it costs to reserve a bike for 30 minutes. I decided to reserve the scooter at the end of my street and find out.

That morning I woke up, had scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee, read a bit, then did the dishes. I opened the Bird app on my phone and looked at the service area and how much of Halifax you could explore. I could go as far as Thornhill, or Cole Harbour. I tapped the "reserve" button, and was immediately prompted with a quiz. "Should you ride on the sidewalk or in the bike lane?"; "E-Bikes and E-Scooters should be ridden against traffic or in the same direction as traffic?"; "How many people are allowed to ride on an e-bike or e-scooter at a time?"; and "Is a helmet mandatory?" I wondered if the app would prevent me from riding if I answered any of these questions wrong. Afterwards it said how much it would cost to reserve an e-bike or e-scooter: the same cost as riding it, $0.44 per minute. I decided not to reserve it.

I walked over to the corner of my street and scanned the QR code on the scooter. It asked me if I wanted to rent a helmet, and I tapped "yes." A friend of mine, who had ridden a Bird e-scooter earlier that week, told me that you had to pay to use the helmets, and I was curious if that was the case. It was not. Using the helmet didn't cost a thing. Though I wouldn't be surprised if you did have to pay to use a helmet, given all the hidden fees. A better choice of words would have been "would you like to borrow a helmet? It's free." I'd already seen lots of people riding these e-scooters around town, the blue helmet secured to the front of the scooter instead of on their heads, and it was probably because they thought they had to pay for it.

The helmet was a size large and just fit me if I loosened the back all the way. That's my fault though, I've got a gigantic head. I brought my own helmet anyway, just in case theirs didn't fit. I also brought it because I didn't want to look like a dweeb riding around in a bright blue helmet. I already felt pretty lame riding an electric scooter.

All the while I was messing around with the helmet, the timer was running, costing money. I clipped the blue helmet back onto the front of the e-scooter and put mine on. I took the scooter off the kickstand, pushed off and started up the hill.

As I started going it felt extremely wobbly. Something was wrong with the front tire and it caused the whole scooter to shake. At first I thought the road might be uneven, but by the time I got to the top of the hill I had come to terms with the fact that the scooter was cooked. Even without the wobble the scooter felt odd. It only had two modes: full throttle, or nothing at all. I wasn't used to standing on two wheels and it was much more unstable than a bike.

I stopped to look at the app for somewhere to park up ahead, preferably with an e-bike I could use. But when I looked at the map, it was empty. The icons indicating the location of the bikes

and scooters were gone, and it didn't show anywhere I could park this thing. I decided to put it back where I found it, and started riding back down the hill.

I parked the scooter back in its chalk outline scooter cage. The app made me scan the code, take a photo of the helmet, scan the surrounding area, a photo of where I parked the scooter. It told me my card was going to be charged later. Whatever. It asked me to leave a review. I gave 1 star, wrote "wheels are clapped" and submitted my review.

Part Three: The Commute to Work

I scanned the QR code of the e-bike. The app then gave me a tutorial on how to ride a bike. Okay, I thought, this is getting a bit ridiculous. I skipped through all the prompts and accidentally selected "yes" when it asked me if I wanted to "rent" a helmet. The helmet unlocked and was now free to bounce around in the front basket for my entire ride to work.

Before I got on I noticed the screws in the crankset were very rusty. Weren't these bikes only on the road for a week? They must have been refurbished and brought from another city. I took the bike off the kickstand and immediately noticed it was very, very heavy. When I pulled it off the curb it loudly slammed onto the road. I also noticed then: no suspension.

I cranked the seat up all the way, then hopped on and started pedalling. The bike made a horrible creaking sound. The bottom bracket was probably dry. The bike felt a little small, but fine. It was a middling size, likely in an effort to accommodate as many riders as possible. I wondered how a smaller rider would have fared, 5'5 or shorter. The bike would have felt massive. I got up over the hill and onto flat ground. The electric motor limited me to around 20 km/h, 25 if I pedalled hard.

I started biking down Devonshire Avenue, a steep street that connects Novalea Drive and Barrington Street. I was used to bombing down this street on my road bike at around 35 km/h, but the highest I reached on the Bird bike was 30. I got to the bottom and waited at the stop light to cross over to the multi-use pathway that ran alongside Barrington. While I waited, I thought about how each of these stops were costing money.

The light turned and I crossed over. While I was biking next to the morning traffic I realized the absurdity of the situation. I was riding this loud, creaky bike, the helmet rattling in the front basket every time I went over the tiniest crack. I started laughing. Then I noticed what looked like a shifter on the handlebars and twisted it, thinking I would shift into a higher gear, and an obnoxiously loud bell went off.

The bike didn't deal with bumps very well. I had to cross North Street, under the MacDonald Bridge, and when I crossed to the other side and hit the bump where road meets sidewalk, the force launched the helmet out of the basket and onto the ground. I stopped, grabbed the helmet, threw it back in the basket and kept going.

A few minutes later I made it to work. I checked the app to find somewhere to park this thing and it was still showing me nothing. I zoomed in a bit, then blue "parking" symbols popped up. When I zoomed out slightly, they all disappeared. Not exactly intuitive. There was a place to park it a minute down the street, on an island on Upper Water Street (next to the Tim Horton's). There was no ramp onto this island, so I shoved the heavy bike over the curb. I scanned all the things, took all the photos. The app told me I wasn't in a parking zone, so I had to repeat the process all over again. Scan, photo, photo, scan. In my review I gave 1 star and wrote: "Noisy as hell. Could use some grease in the bottom bracket."

On my short walk into work I looked at the results. I did 5km in 22 minutes, and it cost $12.17. The scooter debacle cost $5.16, and Bird offered an $0.88 ride credit for my troubles. I sent them an email instead, explaining what had happened. They later sent me an email apologizing with a $10 voucher, so there's that. Some money for the ride home I guess.

Part 4: The Ride Home

When I got off work, there it was. The same creaky bike I had used that morning. I could have walked up the block to find a different one, potentially something nicer, but me and that bike had history. We understood each other. I pulled it off the curb with a satisfying slam, and started biking directly up Duke Street.

I decided I would take the same route home as I always do. I like to get the hills out of the way first, instead of biking down Barrington and having to bike all the way up Devonshire. The hill felt like nothing. The little electric motor was whirring loudly, reaching a top speed of 12 km/h, but it saved me from burning quads, at least for today. That was one positive for the bike. I got up onto Gottingen, then down the backstreets of Maynard street.

It was a beautiful day. The sky was clear, the air was cool and there was a light breeze. I had on a windbreaker and jeans and felt comfortable. The motor of the bike whirred and the helmet rattled loudly in the basket. I wished I was on my bike, silently gliding over the concrete.

I hoped no one I knew saw me. There's no way around it: you felt very uncool riding these bikes. I tried to avoid eye contact when I saw other cyclists. I was waiting for someone to shout, "Those bikes are stupid" so I could shout back, "Yeah, I know."

The ride home cost $10.17, covering 4.9km in 18 minutes. I gave my ride 3 stars.

Part 5: Results

In total my commute cost $22.34, totalling 9.9km or 40 minutes. That's $2.25 per kilometer, or $0.56 per minute. This is of course excluding the $10 credit Bird gave me, and the scooter situation.

For comparison, if I took the bus and used two adult bus tickets it would have cost $6. If I had driven (which I would never do), street parking would have cost $27.50. That's only $5.16 more expensive. Using my own bike would have been free.

I bought my bike, a 1982 Peugeot road bike, on Kijiji for $120. With the help of the volunteers at Bike Again and a few used parts, I fixed it up for about $30. I also bought a helmet for $60, and a good lock for $100. My entire setup, totalling $310, costs the equivalent of 14 commutes by Bird. Even if you balled out and spent $1000 on your bike and accessories, it would cost the equivalent of 45 commutes by Bird.

Part 6: Final Thoughts

So who is this service even for?

My first thought was people with mobility issues who cannot afford the full upfront cost of an e-bike. I recognize that not everyone can pedal up massive hills on a non-motorized bicycle, and not everyone can afford an e-bike. The average e-bike costs around $2000. You can get something entry level at around $1000. There are second-hand options, but then you get into the problem of maintenance (keeping your bike from breaking down) and security (preventing your bike from being stolen).

The United Way has partnered with the city of Halifax and Bird to provide a 50 per cent discount. The discount is offered to "low-income residents, veterans, seniors, newcomers and non-profit employees" and anyone who lives in a "flex-fare zone." Funny enough, I live in one of these zones and can apply for the discount.

One benefit these services have is flexibility. You can pick up a bike whenever you want, go wherever you want (if there's parking), and you're not beholden to bus routes and schedules. It's not as expensive as an Uber or a taxi, and you can enjoy the fresh air and the joy of biking. If your bike isn't making a strange noise and you can ignore the sound of the motor, of course.

For me, the discount still wouldn't be worth it. My commute would have cost $11.17 instead of $22.34, and my entire setup would cost the equivalent of 28 commutes instead of 14. I also love bikes, especially the aesthetics, reliability, and simplicity of 80's road bikes and 90's mountain bikes. I don't love e-bikes. They're more expensive to buy, more expensive to maintain, and more complicated to fix.

Who else is this service for?

When you're downtown, it's 3am, the buses have stopped, and you don't want to pay $40 for an Uber home. Drinking and driving on motorized e-bikes and e-scooters, though against the law, is a reality.

Someone I met, who shall remain nameless, did exactly that this past weekend. They went to watch a hockey game at a bar, had a few drinks, and drove home on an e-scooter. They even dropped a friend off at their house on their way home, both riding on the same scooter; another thing Bird tells its users explicitly not to do. But of course, people are going to do it anyway.

How does Bird plan on preventing this? By enabling a "sobriety test feature that can be turned on at night, often around 10 or 11 p.m., which includes puzzles and a road safety quiz riders have to pass." Good luck with that.

I didn't even mention the logistical issues that come with dockless e-bike and e-scooter rentals. Maintenance staff have to go around collecting these vehicles, repairing them, charging them.

So what's the alternative?

Many large Canadian cities have docking bike share programs: Bike Share in Toronto, BIXI in Montreal, Mobi in Vancouver. I rode Bike Share bikes in Toronto for over two years. They were convenient for getting to work, I could leave them in a docking station and not have to worry about them getting stolen or dealing with repairs. At the time I paid $120 per year. Now they offer a student discount, charging only $84 per year. They even started providing e-bikes back in 2022, the last time I rode them.

One study showed that dockless bike sharing services (like Bird) produce 82% more greenhouse gas emissions than docking bike sharing services. Docking bike share services are more affordable, more sustainable, and, I found, more convenient. You scan your bike and go. When you get to your destination, you throw it in a dock and walk away. Why can't we have something like that in Halifax?

All in all, I had a good laugh. I look forward to never having to ride another one of these e-bikes or e-scooters again. Even for travelling I think there are better options. When I was in Vancouver this past October I rented a bike for the day, rode around Stanley park, got lunch, ripped around the city, and it only cost $35. Thanks Bird, but I'll stick to my bikes.