

NEWS

Chargers and cheaters: Inside the 'cutthroat' race to collect Bird scooters



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Published 11:21 a.m. ET Dec. 7, 2018 | Updated 11:35 a.m. ET Dec. 7, 2018

It's 8:45 p.m. In about 15 minutes, Simone Thomas will begin her workday. She could have started an hour ago and made more money, but she didn't. Thomas plays by the rules.

But many others don't, Thomas and others have told IndyStar. It's like getting a head start on a scavenger hunt — a potentially lucrative one. And it puts chargers who follow the rules at a great disadvantage.

Each evening, Bird chargers like Thomas take to the streets of Indianapolis to grab up the scooters that are scattered around the city's sidewalks. They're worth \$5 to \$20 a piece.

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It's a scramble to collect them, and the more you collect, the more you make. The system provides great incentive to those who break the rules and start early.

And that type of cheating has been happening more and more since the scooters returned to Indianapolis in September, Thomas and other chargers say. It's a competitive world.

“The fact that there’s so much competition out there would be the surprising part,” Thomas said. “People are like, ‘Oh, well, it must be kind of friendly.’ No. It’s cutthroat. It can be ugly some nights.”

IndyStar rode along with this experienced charger on a chilly November night to experience the nightly race to collect scooters.

The Strategy

An hour before the free-for-all begins, Thomas, 30, leaves her west-side home, hops in her Chevy Cruze and heads toward Downtown.

Thomas, a Warren Central graduate and Army veteran who after completing a tour in Iraq works for apps like Uber, Lyft and DoorDash, heads out around 8 most evenings to scope out scooters and plan for how she'll collect her batch that night.

It's dark, and Bird's app is full of black and white markers showing where scooters are available for riders.

As she drives across the White River, Thomas makes mental notes of where scooters are, but she knows she probably won't see them again.

"Those won't be there when we come back through," she said.

The scooters are already condensing on the map.

"You'll see scooters moving throughout the city," Thomas said. "And all of the sudden it will vanish. Then it will populate somewhere else."

The Competition

This is the work of hoarders. Hoarders are chargers who collect scooters before Bird removes them from the rider map so they can easily "capture" large numbers quickly.

Instead of finding and collecting scooters when they become available, hoarders can merely scan the ones they've already lined up. Once a scooter is scanned, it's "captured," taking it off the map that chargers see.

A captured scooter's bounty — the value assigned to it by Bird — will be doled out to the charger if the scooter is fully charged and released to a nest by about 7 the next morning.

"The people who grab three or four — I'm not really worried about them," Thomas said. "It's the ones that grab 15, 20, 30. Cause I was like, that's \$100. That's \$150."

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Now driving through Fountain Square, Thomas is looking for an area with many scooters nearby so she can easily run from group to group and quickly capture that night's take when

the time comes.

Fifteen to 20 scooters sit lined up perfectly on a sidewalk as a pickup truck is parked behind them with its bed ready to be loaded.

Thomas shook her head in disgust. She knows this couldn't have just happened: Bird starting points are usually only four or five scooters. And it's unlikely scooter riders would line up so many scooters so perfectly right before capturing time begins.

But it wasn't always like this.

When Bird arrived in Indianapolis in June, Thomas was one of what she estimated as 30 people who attended an orientation event put on by Bird to train the contractors.

“We were going so hard in the summertime. We were going every day. Every day. No breaks,” Thomas said. And she could make hundreds of dollars a night, making several trips back to her house. One night she collected 33 scooters; she's made \$246 in a single night.

Now she's happy on nights she collects 12 for about \$60.

Her frustrations increased along with the number of chargers, as problems like hoarding became more common.

“Some people are like: ‘They’re stepping up their game. Why aren’t you stepping up yours?’ I’m like, no. That’s cheating.”

She occasionally confronts people she sees collecting too early, but she said she's careful to phrase it as a question.

“You know you’re not supposed to move those this early, right?” Thomas asked an early collector that evening.

She received a common response: "Everyone else is doing it."

The Setback

Thomas has found her starting point for the night; it's away from the hoarders in Fountain Square. Her strategy is set.

Three bunches of scooters sit near the intersection of Senate Avenue, Indiana Avenue and Vermont Street. It's a solid start to the night's collection.

She had her spot. She was ready to go to work. Then along came another rule breaker.

Fourteen minutes before the scooters could be collected, an SUV pulled up. The driver stopped beside a batch that Thomas had planned to grab on her first collection of the night.

They hopped out of the vehicle, threw the scooters Thomas has her eye on into the back seat, made a U-turn in the middle of the four-lane road and drove off.

Just like that, it became more difficult for the rule-following Thomas to reach her nightly goal.

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Thomas fought back with a couple taps of her finger as the driver pulled away. She "capture blocked" the scooters, so they cannot be scanned.

On an average night, Thomas reports many scooters that were grabbed by hoarders.

The experienced charger said if it were up to her she would put a hard cap on the number of scooters a charger can collect each evening. That's already supposed to be happening.

Bird's charger agreement says chargers "may only charge up to 20 Bird Scooters during any calendar day."

However, when asked for comment on this story a Bird spokesperson said, in part, "(chargers) help collect Birds each evening for charging, and they can pick up as many Birds as they want on any given day."

Thomas knows the rule isn't being enforced.

"Bird cares more about getting them charged by, what feels like, any means necessary."

When asked about the steps they've taken to prevent hoarders, a Bird spokesperson provided the following statement:

"Bird works hard to encourage fair practices for everyone in the charger marketplace. We monitor the locations of all Birds and, if necessary, retrieve Birds being kept from public use. Bird's in-app Community Mode reporting feature also has a specific function for reporting Birds that are on private property. When chargers are identified as repeatedly gaming the system by hoarding vehicles on

private property, Bird will take appropriate action, including removing them from the charger platform."

The Starting Gun

With her car still running, Thomas walks across Senate Avenue to the evening's first batch of scooters. Three of them are sprawled across the sidewalk. Not a rider was in sight, but Thomas didn't touch the scooters yet.

It wasn't quite time.

Another flock of scooters was gone, but she kept her eyes fixed on the remaining scooters down the street. Nobody was there to collect early.

At 9 p.m., scooters disappear from the app's rider map. Someone riding a scooter may continue to ride it, but new rides can no longer begin.

This is the beginning of a 3-minute interlude between scooter riding and scooter collection.

Thomas glances from her phone to the scooters she will grab. Still there. Then back to her phone.

She's eager to grab up the scooters near her and very aware that someone else could swoop in to scan them before her.

She stares at the map. Waiting.

The Race

And there they are. The map fully populates. Scooters across the city are available for capturing. The race begins.

Beep. It's 9:03 p.m. She has scanned the first scooter.

Beep. She scans a second scooter, much like you scan groceries at the store.

She hops on the scooter and rides it down the street, a perk of being a charger.

Thomas reaches the last bunch of scooters and scans them.

Beep. Beep.

Now it's time to stack — what chargers call the process of cramming as many scooters as possible into their vehicles.

Many chargers use an SUV, pickup truck or van to collect scooters. Thomas makes it work with her midsize sedan.

Her record for most scooters in her car at one time? Twenty-seven.

There were scooters poking out of her window and trunk, but they all fit.

Thomas said the 26-pound scooters weigh a bit more than the M16s she trained with while in the Army.

“It gets me moving,” Thomas said. “I’m running fast. I’m trying to hurry up. These are 26-pound scooters. I’m running and picking stuff up and feeling strong with my arms.”

With six scooters in the car in about the first 10 minutes, Thomas has a solid start to the evening.

"On to the next stop."

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Fewer than 15 minutes have passed since the scooters became available for collection, but it's already difficult to find groups of scooters. She drives down New York Street, looking for scooters she saw earlier.

With her trunk already packed, she starts putting scooters in through the back door and resting their back tires under her rear windshield.

Scooters nine and 10 are waiting for her on Pennsylvania Street.

She needs two more to reach her nightly goal.

“It’s a race. It’s a good race when we do it right,” Thomas said.

Scooter No. 11 was waiting on Ohio Street. It was in an alley. She scans it, and forcefully stacks it in her sedan stuffed with scooters. She carefully closes the back door.

She's almost done.

The Prize

The last scooter of the night was back on Pennsylvania Street.

Thomas initially wanted to collect 20 scooters, but she settled for 12 — good for \$60 for a bit more than an hour's worth of work.

That total would have been higher had the hoarder not collected the scooters near her starting point earlier in the evening.

“If people would just be up front and legit about it, it would be so much better,” Thomas said.

"The fun of going out and 'hunting' Birds has died."

Thomas was back out of Downtown by 10 p.m., giving her about nine hours to charge the scooters she collected, go to sleep, wake up and release them to the spots that Bird lists on the map before 7 a.m.

She said she has chargers plugged into outlets all over her house. Twenty-two are in her living room. Another 12 are in her bedroom.

Even with all the chargers, she has not noticed a difference in her electric bills. Not like she does when her nieces come over.

"My nieces and nephews will come over, and *they* will spike (my electric bill) up," Thomas said with a laugh.

As Thomas drove back toward her west-side home, she talked about the upcoming holidays and her plans to see her aunt and other family.

“That’s what all of this adds up to, is for me: to get gas money, go see her, go spend a weekend with her and head back here to the chaos of Bird hunting.”

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