

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT CAN'T

The Segway HT was heralded as a revolution in transportation, but high hopes for the scooter are dying fast. Are Segways for the birds? SARAH ROSE

My first response to the invitation for a Segway Safari was, *what do they do with the Segways once they've shot them?*

The poor Segway. There have been few product launches in recent memory that were met with more hoopla or followed by more anticlimax. First adopters, with \$4,495 to spare, lined up to buy the few early motor scooters; since then, however, the “human transporters” have been slow to catch on. While the Segway was supposed to be useful to civil servants, our mailmen and meter maids, in most cash-strapped cities the mail is still delivered the old-fashioned way. Segways hit the market in November 2002 amid projections that 50,000 would sell in the first year; a year later, sales had fallen short of that goal—by 44,000 units. That guy in the park on the Segway does not live on the cutting edge of technology. He is a dork riding a novelty.

Although the scooter's utility may leave the market cold, the promotional wackiness attending the Segway is still a top story. In June 2003 President Bush's embarrassing spill from a Segway made for above-the-fold stories across the country. Forty-one states amended their transportation laws to allow Segways on sidewalks, and now courts are deciding the legality of charging Segway riders with DWIs. So when offered an opportunity to play with a Segway—on a bird watching safari in Florida—I leapt at the chance.

NATURE! TECHNOLOGY! A TRIP TO FLORIDA IN WINTER!

Amelia Island's salt marshes and live-oak forests are home to a variety of migratory birds. Great horned owls, bald eagles, marsh pelicans, and others make their winter home on this barrier island outside Jacksonville, Florida. Some 200 square miles of the island are protected national park, and 1,300 square miles belong to the Amelia Island Plantation resort and development, which prides itself on its earth-friendly efforts. The Segway, while not overtly sustainable, has an aura of

futurism about it; it *feels* ecologically noble. The scooter runs on a 23-pound electric battery, and if you had a green energy source to recharge it, you would in fact be saving the planet. (Amelia Island Plantation, along with much of the country, does not.)

On the safari, I am assigned to a young naturalist from the resort, Tom Woolf. We don helmets and zoom our Segways to a manmade freshwater pool nicknamed Egret Airport. Serenely stationed next to a golf course, five snowy-white egrets pay us no attention whatsoever.

“More people are killed each year by egrets than by sharks,” says Woolf. Egrets and other long-necked birds have an extended vertebra behind their head that works like a lever; this gives them added speed when spearing fish with their beaks. Much of the work of island naturalists involves bird rescue, and if a rescuer gets on the wrong side of an egret, she risks being poked to death by the instinctive rapier thrusts of the beak.

I do not believe Woolf's statistics, but raising binoculars to examine the issue of egret-related fatalities is awkward on a Segway. The machines are balanced by what is called “dynamic stabilization.” Just as we have inner ears to keep our balance, the Segway employs gyroscopes, tilt sensors, and microprocessors to stay level. The gyroscopes respond to your position—when you lean forward, the machine goes forward; press back on your heels, and it goes backward. But standing still is a bitch. The Segway seems to choke a little; my legs wobble like sewing machine needles.

It seems much easier to just step off the scooter to have a good long look at the egrets. But you can't park a Segway. Without a tree nearby, there is nowhere to prop it up. Step off a Segway and it falls over. There is something so forlorn about \$4,495 lying on the ground.

The Segway would seem ideal for birding somewhere like Amelia Island: you're in the outdoors, but you can still cover a lot of ground. Though the Segway is not silent like other low- or zero-emissions travel



options—say, bicycling or kayaking—the whirl of the motor is minimal and doesn't bother the birds.

Except for the great blue heron that takes off as we whiz by. Absorbed by just how fun the scooter is at full speed—12 mph—I almost miss a bird that is five feet tall and blue. With a wingspan of more than six feet, the great blue heron is as graceful on the wing as it is awkward on the ground. As it launches into flight, I nearly crash my scooter. For the first time ever, I feel the tiniest bit of sympathy for President Bush.

SEGWAY SCHADENFREUDE

At the end of the day, the Segway makes me hate myself. Dean Kamen, the Segway's millionaire inventor, is a visionary, and I am a cynic who begrudges the optimism of the human transporter. Kamen has invented a stair-climbing wheelchair and a portable dialysis machine, and put \$20 million of his own money into a combination water purifier and electricity generator that would save the world if only he could get the price below \$100,000 per unit. (The WHO estimates that more than a billion people lack access to clean water.) And that's why there is so much Segway Schadenfreude: the scooter is cool, it has enormous unrealized potential, and at \$4,495, I can't have one. It gets up my nose. ■