

THUNDERBIRD ---

a class of its own

**Not quite a sports car but
still not a sedan, the popular big
T-Bird has a little of each plus a
lot of prestige and style.**

BY RAY BROCK

When Ford discontinued production of their two-passenger Thunderbird and made the switch to a new, larger four-passenger model in 1958, a lot of people (including us) thought that they had made a big mistake. Ford pointed out that surveys of Thunderbird owners indicated the Birds were being bought for prestige and styling—which they delivered, but a common complaint was that the '55-'57 models could only accommodate the driver and one additional passenger in comfort. Holding only two people, the T-Bird was impractical for families with children except as an extra car and with the limited luggage space, wasn't too well suited for lengthy trips by even just two people. Surveyed owners replied that the one improvement most wanted was extra seating room so that at least four people at a time could ride in a T-Bird.

To those of us who recall with affection the bygone days of cruising around the countryside with several friends crammed in the narrow confines of an "A" or "deuce" roadster, the two-passenger Bird was an ideal car and we used to get three, sometimes four, in our own '56 model. Three wasn't so bad, but with four we have to admit that the "togetherness" angle got out of hand. We liked the two-passenger model because it was sporty and easy to drive. Of course, there was an extra car in the garage so that we didn't have to depend on the Bird for cross country travel.

So, in 1958, the four-passenger Bird was introduced and while some of us die-hards sneered and said that it would never get off the ground, the big Bird proceeded to fly as the public placed orders faster than Ford could pull them off the assembly line. Despite a late introduction and the fact that 1958 was a miserable flop as a year for selling cars, the '58 T-Bird sold 37,000 units and dealers ended up at changeover time with orders backlogged for an additional 8000 cars. The four-passenger Bird had proven nearly as successful in one year as the two-passenger model did in three years during which 55,000 units were sold.

The '59 T-Bird is continuing to sell at the same pace as the '58. Very few changes were made when switching model years but without exception, the changes made have improved the '59 Bird. The body-frame unit construction is identical to that used in '58. The all-welded body-frame package provides rattlefree construction, a more rigid unit and gives more passenger room for the size than a conventional frame and body combination. Actually, the unit construction really does consist of a frame and a body but by combining the two into a solid single package, one will lend support to the other and light gauge metal which is easy to spot-weld can be used in the construction. The only heavy gauge metal required is for the frame extension that supports the front suspension and the engine plus various brackets needed to attach rear suspension, bumpers, shocks, etc.

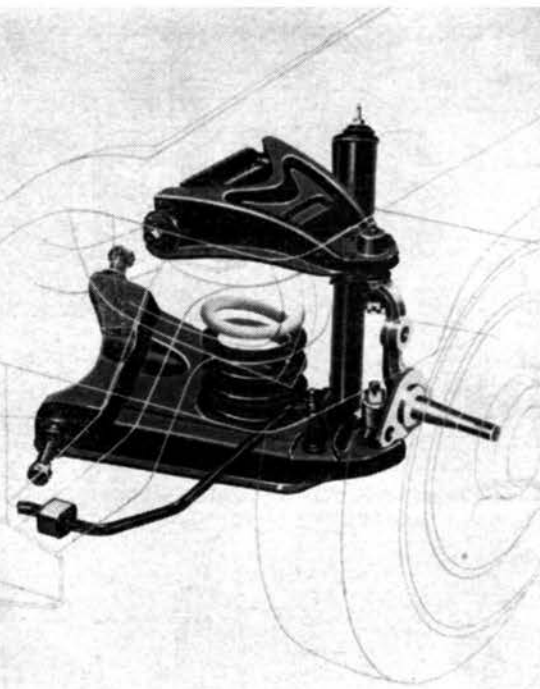
The '59 T-Bird is not a small car. It is 205 inches long, 77 inches wide, 52.5 inches high when loaded, has a 113-inch wheelbase, 60-inch front tread, 57-inch rear tread and clears the ground by only 5.8 inches with four passengers. That 52.5-inch height of course qualifies the '59 Bird as the lowest hardtop model in the U.S. today and it is doubtful that any other American sedan will approach this low overall height in the near future.

To achieve the low height, a step-down floor pan was used. In any other normal sedan, a step-down floor pan, especially in the front, only tends to make the transmission-driveshaft tunnel more pronounced and eliminates passenger footroom. Since the T-Bird was designed for only two people up front, this presented no serious consequences—the hump was extended on up to knee height and made into a console panel which contains heater controls, radio speaker, ash tray and electric window switches. With the rear seat also designed for only two passengers, a high driveline hump through the rear seat

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THUNDERBIRD continued



ABOVE—Front shock absorbers have been moved from conventional location inside the coil spring to a point nearer the end of lower A-arm for better piston action. Front stabilizer bar is huskier for '59.

LEFT—Low hood line of the T-Bird is made possible by the use of a cross-flow radiator which is rumored standard on all 1960 Fords. Hood scoop does not match the carburetor air cleaner like in '55-'57.

area does not present any particular problem. Unless some other Detroit manufacturer is willing to eliminate seating space for two passengers from a six-passenger sedan, the T-Bird will be the lowest in the industry for quite a while. One distinct disadvantage results from the high driveline hump though, and that is the fact that the passengers must enter the side of the car that they intend to sit on because unless you are pretty agile, you can't slide from one side, over the hump, to the other side of the car.

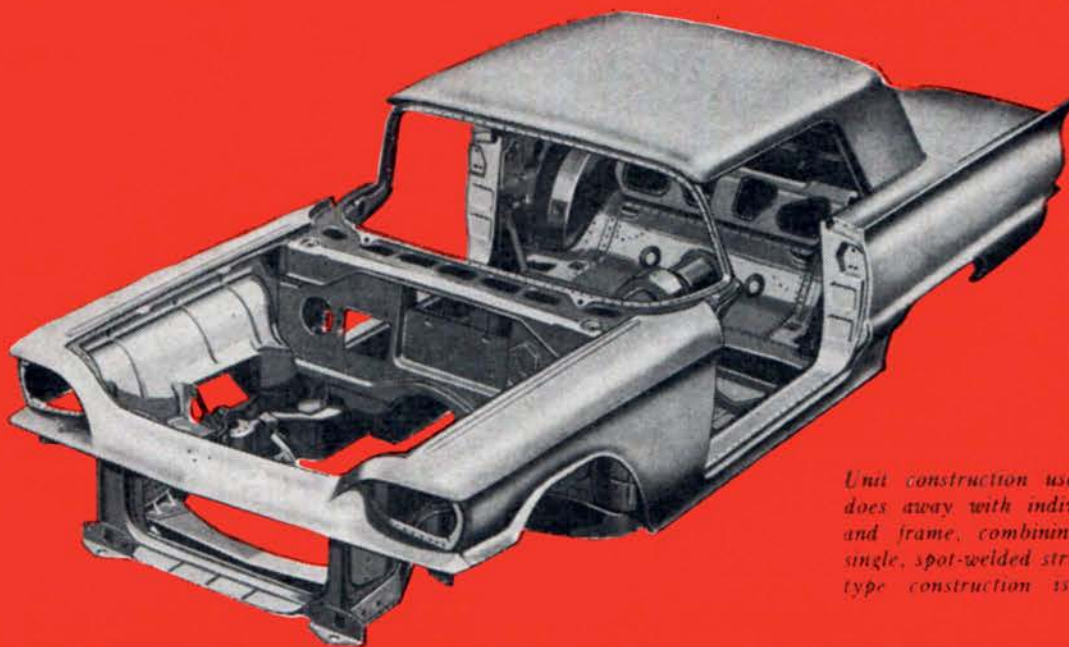
Individual bucket type seats are used in the front with each seat adjustable on a sliding track for fore and aft position. The driver's seat can also be fitted with a power option which will permit four-way adjustment. The right side passenger seat has the conventional finger latch for adjustment. The rear seat is contoured to give a bucket effect although it is a bench type. A fifth passenger trying to ride the seat over the driveline hump will yell uncle after a short distance because it is not too well padded. Entry into the rear seat of the Bird is much easier than any other two-door hardtop model we've tested lately as the front seat backs fold well forward and the wide door permits passengers to step in or out easily. As a matter of fact, the rear seat of a Bird is easier to enter than the front seat.

Getting into the driver's seat of the Bird is harder than with most other two-door hardtops. This is due to the low seats, step-down floor pan, low steering wheel and the location of the door. It is slightly farther to the rear than the door of most cars and requires the driver or front seat passenger to stick one leg in first and then swing forward a bit while sitting down. If the Bird is parked between cars in a parking lot so that the doors

cannot be fully opened, entry or exit is more complicated.

From the passengers' standpoint, once in the Bird, everything is nice and rosy. The seats are comfortable, headroom in both the front and rear is much better than average and footroom is adequate although the wide, high driveshaft tunnel keeps the feet pretty well confined to the well between tunnel and door sill. If the rear seat passengers are long legged and the front seats are to the rear extremities of their adjustment, the Bird gets a little short on knee room like all other two-door hardtops.

From the driver's seat, we made several observations during our test. With the seat all the way back and as low as it would go, we still felt a little cramped, although not as much so as with the Corvette we tested a couple of months ago. The steering wheel was too close and too low for comfortable arm swinging; the central speedometer was easy to read but first one and then the other hand had to be moved off the wheel ring to get a clear view of the fuel and temperature gauge on the left or the clock on the right. Oil and generator warning lights are located near the speedometer and were easy to see. Leg room was ample and pedal position was good but we noticed on both of the Birds we drove that a lot of heat is ducted away from the engine and transmission down through the high driveline tunnel and back under the car. Average driving on days when temperature didn't exceed 80° generated enough heat so that the tunnel was quite warm when touched by hand and actually would radiate heat to the driver's right foot and lower leg. Even with the fresh air vent open, the radiation could be noticed. Our first thought was that with all of the heat in the console seat divider, the radio speaker quality won't last too long because



Unit construction used on Bird does away with individual body and frame, combining two into single, spot-welded structure. This type construction is rattlefree.

high temperatures will cause the speaker horn to split in a hurry.

Vision is good in the Bird with the exception of the small panels between side and rear windows. This isn't a serious restriction, however. As you might expect by looking at the price tag of a T-Bird, quality has not been overlooked. Interior as well as exterior finish is very good and if you are the type who really demands the best, you can pay extra and order a genuine leather interior.

Underneath, the '59 T-Bird looks a lot like the regular Ford in the suspension department. In fact, many of the suspension components used on the Bird are interchangeable with the '59 Ford passenger cars. Up front, unequal length A-arms with ball joints between arms and spindle plus a coil spring provide independent suspension for each wheel. A link type stabilizer bar fastens between the lower A-arms on each wheel to control body roll. This bar has been made stronger for '59 with an increase in diameter over those used on '58 Birds. So, if you have a '58 Bird that rolls too much to suit you, consider installing the '59 front stabilizer bar. It doesn't cost much and is simple to exchange. Two different coil springs are used on the '59 Birds, one for cars using the 352-inch Ford engine and the other for cars equipped with the optional 430-inch Lincoln engine. Naturally, the heavier coil goes with the 430-incher and has the extra beef needed to support the added weight of the Lincoln. Tubular shock absorbers are used between frame brackets and the lower A-arm but instead of being inside the coil spring, they are mounted well outboard where they will be subject to more travel and give better control.

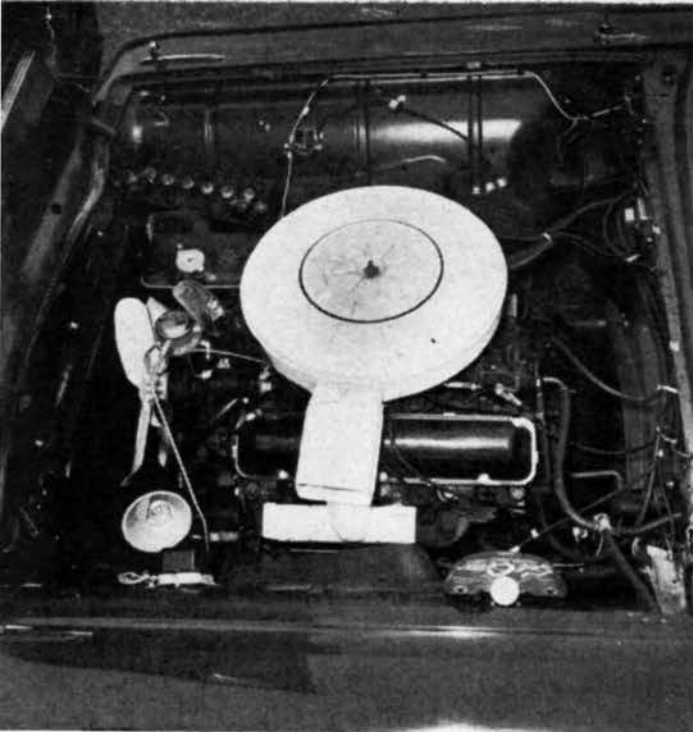
At the rear, a suspension change was made for 1959. Last year's Bird used stamped steel trailing arm links with coil springs, torque arms and a cross-chassis track bar. This suspension didn't set the world on fire and made the '58 Bird a pretty loose piece of machinery when it came to corners. For '59, Ford went back to their tried and true semi-elliptical leaf springs that mount parallel to the chassis center line and not only provide springing but also give a secure sidewise location to the rear axle. In addition, torque and braking forces are resisted

by the shorter front section of the leaves. Tubular shocks are angularly mounted in a conventional manner, between the spring clip plate and brackets on the underside of the body. This suspension system is a big improvement over that used in '58 and shows up in better handling and ride this year.

There are two engines available for the '59 T-Bird, a fact which some owners of '59 models might be a little surprised to learn at this date. The standard powerplant is a 352-inch V8 rated at 300 horsepower and used also as the top optional engine in the regular Ford passenger car line. The optional engine for T-Birds is a 430 cubic inch, identical to that used in Lincolns and large Mercurys and rated at 350 horsepower. When the '59 Birds were first introduced, no publicity was given the fact that the 430-inch Lincoln engine was optional because the T-Bird assembly line was not set up for the installation of the larger engines. Each time one came through, a number of extra steps were involved which slowed down the line and cost money. This problem was eventually solved so that today the Lincoln engine can be installed in the same length of time as the 352-incher. By the time assembly line problems had been solved, the '59 Bird sales were in full swing so rather than be late with the announcement, no particular mention was made of the Lincoln engine option. We have talked to owners of '59 T-Birds who were unaware that they could have ordered a Lincoln engine.

The standard V8 is basically the same as last year's Bird engine except that the ignition has been changed slightly and compression ratio has been dropped from 10.2 to 9.6:1. The bore is 4 inches, stroke is 3.50 inches and as we mentioned, the displacement is 352 cubic inches. The 300 horsepower rating is at 4600 rpm and a maximum torque rating of 395 foot/pounds at 2800 is listed. This is with a few small reservations the same engine which we featured in two issues of HOT ROD (August-September, 1958) as Edelbrock Equipment Company did a complete engine dynamometer series. At that time we found the engine to deliver just a little better than 200 actual horsepower with no correction for temperature, barometric pressure or

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THUNDERBIRD *continued*

humidity. In this, the Ford engine is of course, not alone; all of our production V8's fall short of their advertised horsepower when placed on an engine dyno. A small change in the ignition advance resulted in about 225 horsepower and, assuming that Ford's '59 ignitions have a better advance curve, the 352 engine should produce an honest 225 horsepower which is ample for the average driver.

The Lincoln engine has a 4.30-inch bore, 3.70-inch stroke, 10:1 compression ratio and a single four-barrel carburetor. With 430 cubic inches of displacement, largest in the industry, the 350 horse rating is at 4400 rpm and the torque rating is 490 foot pounds at 2800 rpm. The Lincoln engine does not have a conventional combustion chamber in the head as does the 352 Ford engine, instead the valves seat on a flat head surface and the chamber is formed between the tops of the pistons and the top of the block which is milled 10° from perpendicular to the cylinder bore.

Engine location in the four-passenger Birds is directly over the front axle line. This 430-inch Lincoln engine has plenty of room to all sides and sits far enough ahead of the firewall that a large floor hump isn't needed over bell housing.

Bird road clearance is not quite six inches so the car is not too well suited for off-the-road travel. Spring and shock action over such roads is good but rocks and high centers will drag underbody, exhaust system, pan and transmission.

Snug, neat appearing front compartment has a pair of comfortable bucket seats separated by a console over driveline tunnel. Simple instrument cluster is easy to read but dials are partially shielded from view by driver's hands on wheel.



PHOTOS BY ERIC RICKMAN AND FORD MOTOR COMPANY



For prospective Bird owners who might buy the 430 engine option and desire a bit more for competition, a triple carburetion setup is also available. This is being made by Bill Stroppe and is a modification of the Marauder manifold offered as an option last year by Mercury. This aluminum triple intake manifold uses three Ford two-barrel carburetors with vacuum controlled progressive linkage on the two outside carburetors. Normal operation is with the center carburetor only. Also included in the kit offered by Stroppe is a cast aluminum air cleaner housing fitted with a paper filtering element. With the triple carburetion, last year's Marauder engine was rated at 400 horsepower, the only other difference being 10.5:1 compression for the Marauder.

Birds equipped with the standard 352 engine have a choice of three transmissions. A three-speed column shift transmission is standard equipment. It has gear ratios of 2.49, 1.59 and 1 to 1. Reverse is 3.15 and only second and high gears are synchromesh. An overdrive unit is optional behind this transmission which will give 28% lower engine speeds for a given road speed. The optional automatic transmission for the 352 is Ford's Cruise-O-Matic that has three forward speeds of 2.40, 1.47 and 1 to 1 with a torque converter coupling that has a maximum multiplication of 1.9 to 1. This Cruise-O-Matic is, in our personal opinion,

as good as any automatic transmission available on the market today. It is positive so that engine noise isn't excessive yet gives smooth upshifts. Downshifts can also be made into either second or low gear to help slow the car, second gear engaging at about 70 mph and low at about 25 mph. Downshifts into second are very smooth and even low-gear downshifts are not objectionable.

If you buy the 430-inch engine for your Bird, there are a couple of possible drawbacks. First, you cannot order the regular factory air conditioning unit; it hooks between firewall and engine and won't clear with the big engine. Second, you cannot get either a standard transmission or overdrive with the big V8. Although you might have heard of Lincoln engined T-Birds at Daytona or other NASCAR tracks with standard transmissions, the car builders had to make the changes themselves because Ford won't build them that way. The automatic transmission that comes with the Lincoln engine is called Cruise-O-Matic but it is actually a Multi-Drive Merc-O-Matic. The two are the same in operation but the Merc-O-Matic is slightly stronger to take the added torque of a larger engine. This transmission has one feature not found in the Cruise-O-Matic; a hill-holder. When stopped on a steep grade with the engine idling and the transmission selector in D2, the car will not roll backwards. Of course, as we pointed out in our Mercury test a few months ago, it is a simple matter to hold the brake with the left foot on up-grades when driving a car with automatic transmission so the hill-holder is of no particular advantage.

Rear axle ratios used with the various engine and transmission combinations are as follows: 352 engine with standard transmission, 3.70; 352 with overdrive, 3.70; 352 with Cruise-O-Matic, 3.10; 430 engine with Cruise-O-Matic, 2.91. These are the only gear ratios listed but since the T-Birds use the same rear axle assembly as the current Ford passenger cars, gear changes present no problem with a good selection of ratios from 2.69 to nearly 6:1. A limited slip differential is no longer listed by Ford.

Brakes for the T-Bird are the same on all models. Both front and rear drums are 11 inches in diameter and use 2½-inch wide lining. Total lining area is 225.5 square inches. Vacuum booster power brakes are optional. We do not make a prescribed "torture test" on the brakes of cars we test for HRM, rather we prefer to take note of the way the brakes react under normal driving conditions plus a few of the paces we put the car through. In normal driving, the T-Bird's brakes were quite good although in our opinion, the power assist could have given more assistance. It takes firm application to halt the Bird. We experienced only a hint of brake fade in normal driving and then only when using the brakes in downhill mountainous terrain but we got them hot in a hurry when recording our acceleration tests. After clocking a 0-60 mph acceleration run, then bringing the car to a fairly fast stop and repeating the procedure a couple of more times, the brakes faded so badly that they were practically useless. Recovery was quick after driving for a mile or so at moderate speeds to force cool air under the car but on subsequent fast stops, we made use of both second and low gears in the automatic transmission to help retard the car. With the Bird crouching so low to the ground and drums so well protected from air flow, they get hot in a hurry. Comparing these brakes against other cars we have tested this year, the Bird would be near the bottom of the list.

The steering on the '59 Bird is smooth and sure with the same gear used for both conventional and power equipped cars. This gear has a ratio of 20:1 but overall steering ratio is 25:1 due to linkage arrangement. Our test cars were both equipped with the Bendix linkage assist type power unit so we had no opportunity to try a conventional type. The power type is very good and although the ratio of 25:1 sounds slow by today's standards, the short 113-inch wheelbase is a helpful factor and the steering response is just right for everyday use.

For just plain cruising down the road, the T-Bird is at least equal to any car we've tried this year and maybe the best of the bunch. This statement is based on smooth riding ability, stability on uneven roads, response on sharp dips and driving

ease. The car is easy to control over all types of roads and has much better stability than the '58 Bird, attributable largely to the revamped rear suspension, we believe. Both Birds we used for our test weighed nearly the same, just shy of 4200 pounds full of fuel but minus occupants, although one had a Lincoln engine and the other had the Ford engine. The heavier Lincoln engine was offset by an air conditioning unit in the car with the 352 Ford engine. Although 2260 pounds or 54% of this weight was on the front wheels, the Bird does a very good job of getting through corners too. The way that the car is laid out, 55% of the passenger weight in the front seats is supported by the rear wheels while 82% of the rear seat passenger weight goes on the rear wheels. So, if the Bird were loaded with four passengers weighing 150 pounds apiece, the weight distribution would shift so that only 51% would be on the front wheels, 49% on the rear.

The Bird stays very flat on curves, thanks to the low height and center of gravity and will get through sharp corners in rapid fashion if pushed. The car is certainly no sports car in agility and the steering wheel is too close for comfort when changing directions in a hurry but it is easy to see why the Lincoln-



1959 T-Bird made the trip through high pressure water spray without showing signs of leakage around doors or windows. Many of the cars we test do leak badly on this same wash rack.

engined Birds are doing quite well when modified a bit to compete against other late model stock cars. Again, that leaf suspension for '59 gives a big improvement over the coil suspension used last year. Also, we'd better not forget the huskier front stabilizer bar which controls body roll.

In performance, the Bird with the 352 engine that we tested was no ball of fire, requiring 10.5 seconds to get from 0 to 60 mph. This is about average for the '59 crop however and the car did have a 3.10 rear axle plus air conditioning so we will admit that it has enough to satisfy the majority of buyers. We did not make any other timed acceleration runs or quarter mile runs with the 352-inch Bird because we had been promised the hotter Lincoln-engined Bird later. After we got our chance with the 430-inch Bird, we took it out to a quarter-mile strip which we used during uncrowded weekdays and proceeded to try it out.

Before we get started, we'll once again remind you that Birds with the 430-inch engines are fitted with a 2.91 rear axle ratio so are definitely not designed for ¼-mile drag races. All standing starts were made in Drive range and passing checks were made with second gear manually engaged. As we warned you, the car was not fast getting off the mark and needed 3.9 seconds to get

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READ WHAT MOTOR TREND SAYS!

From February Motor Trend

Car-Skin, a reconditioner for automotive finishes, is a fast-cleaning solution that dissolves surface scum and oxidation and removes them without hard rubbing. The manufacturer claims that this is accomplished without abrasives, and from the tests, we believe it.

Maroon finishes, known for their rather rapid weathering, usually wear thin in a short time due to the frequent "cutting" necessary to keep them looking like new. Abrasives remove an appreciable amount of paint with each use, as is shown by the paint color picked up on the rubbing cloth. The hood of a Mercedes 190-S that is seldom garaged and requires a lot of attention to keep it shiny, was treated once over lightly. With hardly more than the effort to work the solution over the area, the surface was restored to the deep smooth surface and color of the original paint. Only faint traces of the maroon color picked up on the cleaning pad, yet the paint surface was slick and free from any trace of oily film.

Car-Skin also works beautifully on household furniture, imparting a high gloss to finely finished wood and metal surfaces without leaving a dust-catching film common to many furniture polishes.

Car-Skin Products Corp., Flemington, N. J., sell their product through parts houses and service stations for \$1.45 for a 16-ounce can. To preserve the newly cleaned surface the manufacturer recommends the use of their Car-Skin advanced formula no rubbing paste wax, with a duration of up to 12 months, at \$2.00 per can.



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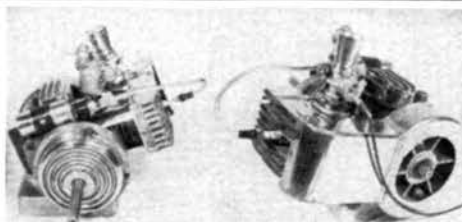
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STEEN'S
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THUNDERBIRD

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from a standing start to 30 mph. 0-60 mph times averaged 9 seconds flat and the car started feeling better near the 60 mph mark. Simulated passing conditions required 6.2 seconds from 30-60 mph and 8.4 seconds from 50-80 mph. In the quarter mile, slow takeoffs naturally kept the Bird from setting any strip records but once the car got to about 75 mph, it seemed to take a new lease on life. Times for the quarter averaged a so-so 17 seconds flat but the speed at the end of the quarter was a respectable 86.57 mph.



Bird radiators have a cross-flow core with tanks on either end. This permits low hood line by absence of top expansion tank. A filler-expansion tank mounts atop engine.

If someone were really interested in running at the drags with one of the 430 Birds, someone who had the time and money to play with gear ratios, limited slip differentials and engine tuning, there is no reason why the Bird shouldn't be capable of holding its own with the other similarly equipped "stockers" running at the weekend drag races.

We made a mileage check on the 352 Bird, averaging 14.4 mpg for nearly 600 miles of driving. This included some heavy traffic, a lot of freeway driving, and a small amount of mountain driving. When comparing our 14.4 against the 19.2 mpg average recorded on a recent cross-country economy run, our mileage figures would probably be a good indication of what the car will deliver. We didn't baby the Bird we drove while 19.2 represents a super-tuned car carefully driven. We didn't have enough time with the 430-inch Bird to discover what kind of mileage it would deliver under average driving conditions but estimating from the amount of gasoline burned in our acceleration and handling tests, we would guess the 430 Bird to be nearly as good as the 352 version. The



Bill Stroppe of Long Beach, California, has modified progressive triple carburetion used on 400 hp '58 Mercury Marauders to fit under the T-Bird hood. This intake system fits 430-inch optional Lincoln engine.

larger displacement engine and the higher rear axle ratio seem to just about cancel each other.

After driving two Birds equipped with different engines we have to report that there is no big difference between the two for average driving. Handling and ride are comparable and except for heavier front springs to support the Lincoln engine, the cars are identical in all chassis departments. The big engine gives better throttle response despite a higher rear axle ratio but not as much as you might expect from 72 more cubic inches.

After several days and many hundreds of miles behind the wheel of the '59 T-Bird, we got to know the car pretty well. If we had one, we'd try to figure out a way to move the driver's seat back away from the wheel a little more; of course, we have longer arms than most. The brakes are just barely adequate for everyday use and might prove to need frequent relining if the car is driven by a hard throttle pusher. Then, there is the little item of heat from the console.

Just as it was when a two-passenger model, the latest Bird is going to be sold more for prestige and styling than it is for outstanding performance, although it will hold its own with most. Those early Bird owners who answered Ford's questionnaire got their wish—a Bird with room for four people at a time and luggage space, too. They got that last year with the '58 but little improvements have made the car even better this year. And to think, we said that it would never fly!

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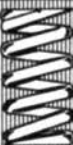
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