

Thunderbird



Ford's plush style setter has its share of faults and shortcomings, but it's still the classic example of a prestige car

by Jim Wright, Technical Editor

FROM A SALES ANGLE the Thunderbird has always been a huge success. But if one were to sit down and try to analyze the reasons for this success, he might find the answers a trifle hard to come by. That is, unless the analyst were willing to concede that the 'Bird is a big seller only because of its exceptional good looks.

Luckily, Thunderbird has always embodied the type of advanced styling that has a way of later showing up on other cars from other manufacturers, which, in a way, proves its merit. It is also a car that is loaded with creature comforts, most of them standard equipment. These two points, coupled with the type of quality that one would expect from its healthy price tag, no doubt add up to PRESTIGE, in big letters, but other than this the glamor-puss from Ford doesn't have too much going for it. In the two-seater days, the 'Bird attained a small degree of Performance Image, but this can't be applied to the four-seater, which has neither earned nor deserves it.

Of course, when one is buying prestige, a lot of basic things can be easily overlooked. Who cares if the car has a large price tag, is grossly overweight, offers less than average performance (even with 300 hp), will consistently deliver horrible gas mileage, at times handles like a land-locked whale and suffers from an almost complete lack of usable storage space?

But don't get us wrong. A lot of the great cars of the past, recognized today as classics, suffered from the same ills. We truly love and respect them for what they were, and are — just as we truly love and respect the Thunderbird for what it is —





TIGHT CORNERS BRING OUT THE WORST IN THE 'BIRD, AS UNDERSTEER AND BODY ROLL ARE EXCESSIVE AND DETRACT FROM OVERALL COMFORT.

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a status symbol deluxe. And we only hope that Ford keeps right on punching them out.

This year's 'Bird is little changed from last year's model. The grille insert is different, as are the tail light lenses, and some of the chrome trim has been changed. On the inside an assist bar has been added for the front seat passenger. Otherwise, the '62 exterior and interior are identical to the '61 TB.

As we mentioned in our December '61 styling story, the Thunderbird is now being offered in four versions. In addition to the basic hardtop and convertible, they now have the Landau, which features a vinyl-covered hard top with S-shaped landau bars on the earmuffs, and the Sports Roadster, which is a convertible with wire wheels and a molded fiberglass tonneau cover with padded headrests.

For its test car, MOTOR TREND had a Sports Roadster, equipped with the standard 390-cubic-inch, 300-hp engine, automatic transmission and 3-to-1 rear axle. Also installed as standard equipment were power brakes and steering and the swing-away steering wheel. Optional equipment included air conditioning, power seat and windows, and leather upholstery.

Including all the above-mentioned accessories the Sports Roadster has an AMA-listed curb weight of 4842 pounds, making it what surely must be the heaviest car ever on a 113-inch wheelbase (no fair counting miniature armored cars). With the gas tank topped, two hefty testers, and

a load of instrumentation, the test weight easily topped the 2½-ton mark. Which goes a long way towards explaining why 300 horses can't do a better job of moving the 'Bird from here to there. The 0-to-30, 0-to-45 and 0-to-60-mph runs were clocked in 4.0, 7.0 and 11.2 seconds, respectively. Elapsed time for the quarter-mile was 19.2 seconds, with a terminal speed of 78 mph.

Readers who remember recent road tests will recall several cars with up to 90 hp less that easily equaled these times. They will also recall several with engines that were equal in size and output that posted 0-to-60 times of eight seconds or less.

Top speed was fairly good. A couple of runs down the long Riverside International Raceway back straight produced an honest 107 mph on our Weston electric speedometer.

Overall performance could be improved by ordering the optional engine. The option consists of the same inches with higher compression and three two-barrel carburetion for 40 more horses.

If you can afford a 'Bird you probably won't be too interested in how far it will run between filling stations. But just for the record, 500-plus miles of all types of driving produced a 9.8-mpg overall average. This included a 13.4-mpg high for open-road cruising, a 10.6 mpg recorded in normal city traffic, and the 7.5-mpg low chalked up during our Riverside tests.

The power-assisted, self-adjusting brakes feature a fairly good 198 square inches of

effective area, but they suffer from inadequate cooling provisions. After two successive crash stops from the 107-mph top-speed runs, the brakes were faded to the limit and it took a long time for them to cool to the point where we could run our normal braking tests. Once they had cooled, the brakes did a good job of bringing the car down from 30 and 60 mph in 45 and 160 feet. Using maximum pedal pressure (just short of locking the brakes), the braking is even and the stops are straight-line. We noticed that when light pedal pressures were used, braking was slightly uneven and produced some body sway.

The Thunderbird's suspension is not as firm as we've come to expect from others in the Ford line. This results in a comfortable ride (very) which we felt was completely suited to this type of car. It also allows excessive body roll during cornering, which is not suited to *any* car. During low-speed cornering one notices an annoying "heeling-over" effect, which is probably caused by the front-end geometry (negative caster setting for reduced steering effort).

We found no fault with the high-speed handling. From normal cruising speeds up to 107 mph the 'Bird was pleasingly steady with good directional stability and a solid ride free from any tendency to float. Slow corners produced a normal amount of front-end plough, but at higher speeds the understeer felt about right.

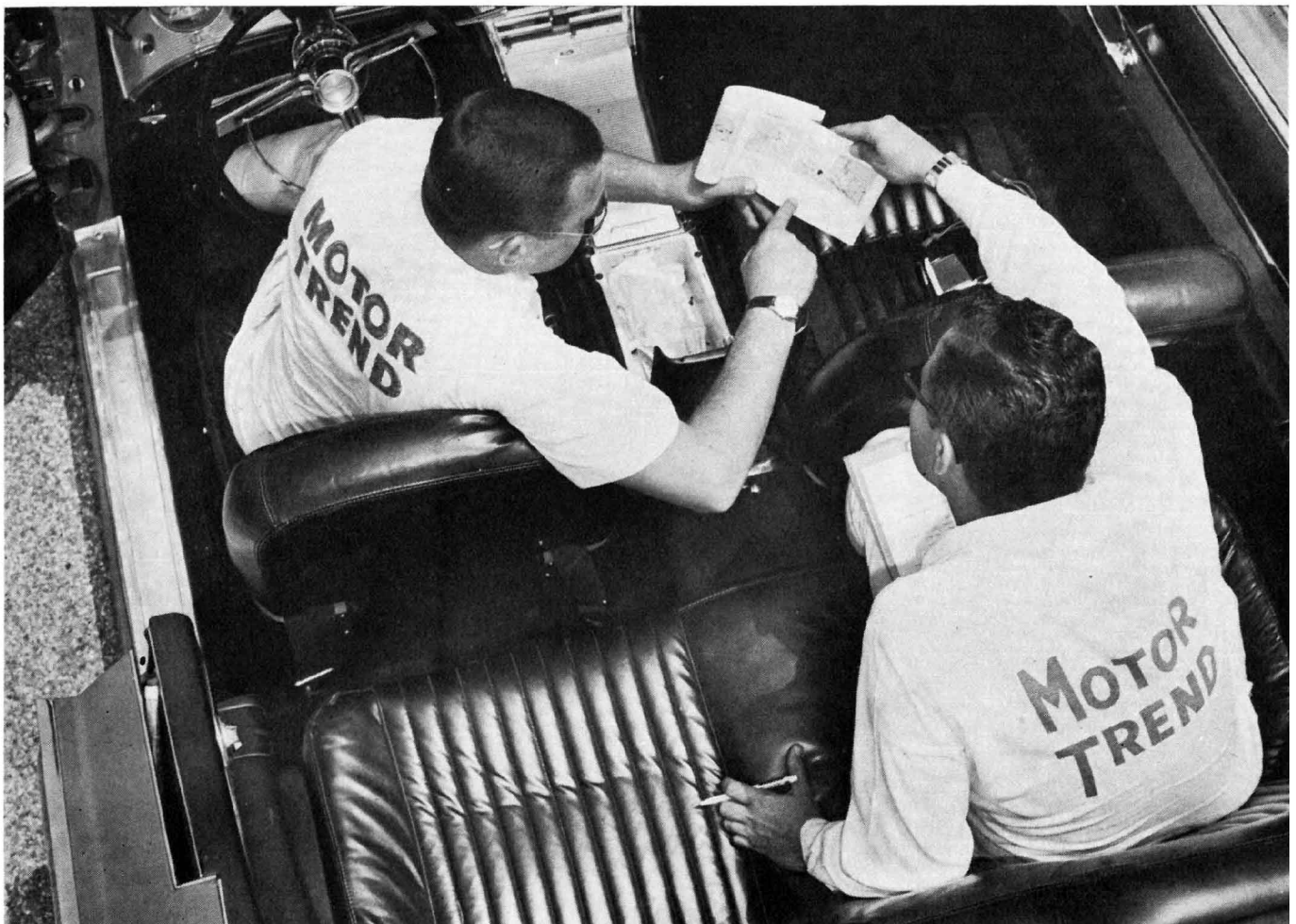
The ride is also one of the quietest



Power accessory plumbing, radiator header tank and spring towers limit engine accessibility and hamper simple servicing.

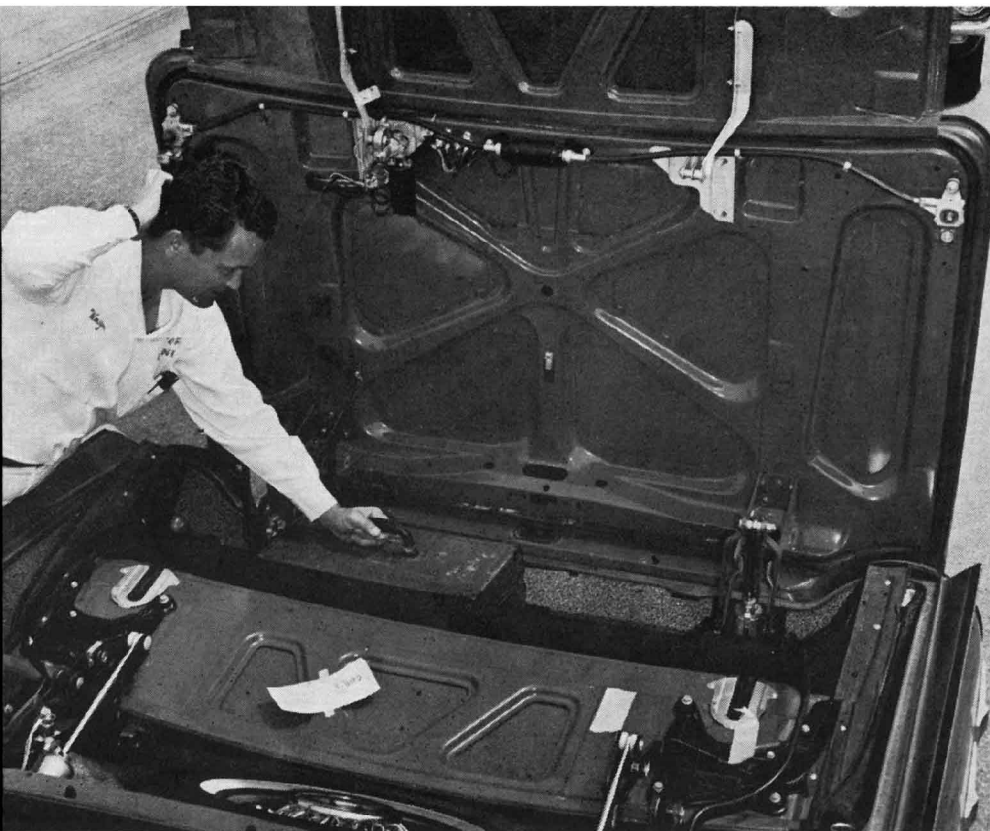


Sports Roadster features genuine, simulated knock-off hub caps and chrome, bolt-on wire wheels, standard equipment.



REAR SEAT LEGROOM DOESN'T OFFER MUCH COMFORT ON A LONG HAUL, BUT THE WELL-CONTOURED SEATS DO MUCH TO MAKE UP FOR THIS.

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Other car owners have a problem deciding what to take on a long trip. T-Bird owners won't have this problem because lack of room prevents taking anything.



we've experienced in any car. At high speeds, all engine and road noises are effectively sealed off from the passenger compartment. The welded steel body/frame is squeak- and rattle-free — even in the convertible series.

The full-time power steering also feels very good and is just quick enough with 3.6 turns between locks.

Quality throughout the entire car is for the most part excellent. All panels and doors as well as the trim are perfectly aligned. Unfortunately, the test car's top and the side windows weren't so perfectly aligned, and after a wash job the front seats were full of water.

The traditional T-Bird interior, with its bucket seats and center console, has now been copied by just about everyone but still remains one of the most attractive. Our test car had the optional leather seats, which were glove-soft and equally comfortable. There is plenty of room for four adults, although rear-seat legroom is naturally on the short side. We felt the steering wheel could have been located further from the driver for maximum comfort, but its swing-away action was welcome, especially when getting in or out of the car. Over-the-wheel visibility is good, and even people of less than average height will be able to see over it.

Instruments and controls are conveniently located, and only two idiot lights are used (oil pressure and amps). Only storage space available in the interior is a shallow tray located in the center console. This is lighted and has a lockable, hinged lid but won't carry more than a map, two packs of cigarettes and a piece of Kleenex.

At first glance it appears that you can carry even less in the trunk. Most of the space here is taken up by the spare tire and the top-operating mechanism. With the top down there is barely enough room for even a woman's make-up case. The top-operating mechanism is an engineering masterpiece and has to be seen to be believed — but all it does is put the top up and down.

With the headrest/tonneau cover in place, the 'Bird takes on a real sporty look. But we wonder if it is worth the trouble. The top has to be down for its installation (not-so-convenient one-man job) and when not in use must be stored in the garage. It also effectively blocks off the use of the back seat.

The under-hood area is as crowded as the trunk, with its maze of power accessory plumbing and wiring and won't win you any kind looks from your favorite mechanic when you pull the 'Bird in for a tune-up or repair.

In spite of what we consider to be faults, we wouldn't have the T-Bird any other way — it's the only car around that can make even the lowest peon (like a road tester) look like a million bucks behind its steering wheel. /MT



WIRE WHEELS HELP PROMOTE MORE EFFECTIVE BRAKE COOLING, BUT ONCE FADED, THE BRAKES STILL REQUIRE TOO LONG A COOL-DOWN PERIOD.

THUNDERBIRD SPORTS ROADSTER

2-door, 4-passenger convertible

OPTIONS ON CAR TESTED: Air conditioning, power-seat and windows, radio, heater, leather upholstery, whitewall tires

BASIC PRICE: \$5439

PRICE AS TESTED: \$6318.30 (plus tax and license)

ODOMETER READING AT START OF TEST: 6967 miles

RECOMMENDED ENGINE RED LINE: 5200 rpm

PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION (2 aboard)

0-30 mph.....	4.0 secs.
0-45 mph.....	7.0
0-60 mph.....	11.2

Standing start 1/4-mile 19.2 secs. and 78 mph

Speeds in gears @ 4300 rpm

1st.....	43 mph	2nd.....	72 mph
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Speedometer Error on Test Car

Car's speedometer reading.....	31	47	51	62	73	83
Weston electric speedometer.....	30	45	50	60	70	80

Observed miles per hour per 1000 rpm in top gear.....23.5 mph

Stopping Distances — from 30 mph, 45 ft.; from 60 mph, 160 ft.

SPECIFICATIONS FROM MANUFACTURER

Engine

Ohv V-8
Bore: 4.05 ins.
Stroke: 3.78 ins.
Displacement: 390 cubic inches
Compression ratio: 9.6:1
Horsepower: 300 @ 4600 rpm
Torque: 427 lbs.-ft. @ 2800 rpm
Horsepower per cubic inch: 0.769
Ignition: 12-volt coil

Gearbox

3-speed automatic; column-mounted lever

Driveshaft

One-piece, open tube

Differential

Hypoid — semi-floating
Standard ratio: 3.0:1

Brakes

Hydraulic drums (cast iron), with power assist; self-adjusting
Front: 11-in. dia. x 3 in. wide
Rear: 11-in. dia x 2.5 in. wide
Effective lining area: 198 sq. in.

Suspension

Front: Independent coil springs; upper A arm, single lower control arm; double-acting tube shocks and stabilizer bar
Rear: Rigid axle; 4-leaf semi-elliptic springs; double-acting tube shocks

Steering

Recirculating ball and nut, with integral power
Turning diameter: 40.2 ft.
Turns: 3.6 lock-to-lock

Wheels and Tires

Steel, with chrome wire spokes; bolt-on — 5 lugs
8.00 x 14 4-ply tubeless rayon tires

Body and Frame

Fully unitized
Wheelbase: 113 ins.
Track: front, 61 ins.; rear, 60 ins.
Overall length: 205 ins.
Curb weight: 4842 lbs.



Swing-away steering wheel is now offered as standard equipment. Unit makes for easier entry but would be more effective if it were also adjustable fore and aft.