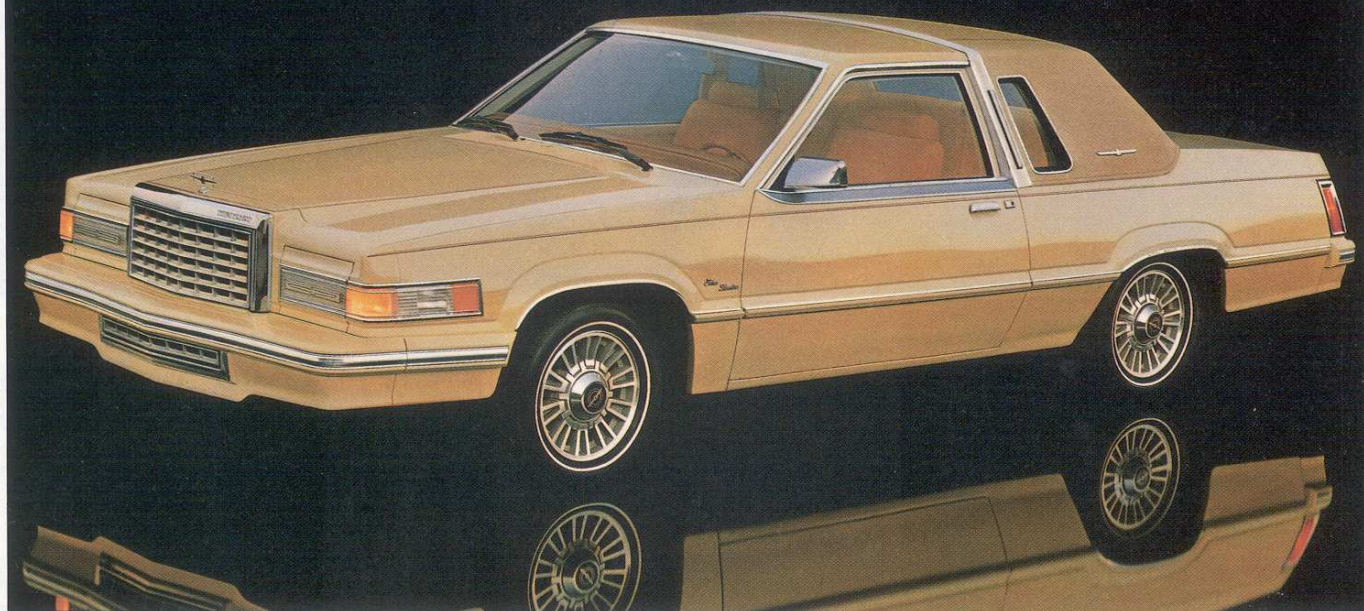


1980-82 Ford Thunderbird: "The Thunder's Still There."



The ninth-generation Thunderbird seemingly had everything going for it. It was all-new, downsized, roomier, and more economical. The last was particularly important as the corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) rules that had been enacted for 1978 had increased to 20 miles per gallon for 1980, and the Thunderbird had to help Ford meet it.

The new Thunderbird faced a serious problem right off the bat: it was born at a bad time. That's because 1980 was a year of "stagflation," a combination of a stagnant economy and double-digit inflation that clobbered the entire U.S. auto industry beginning in the spring of 1979—and the second great fuel crisis, initiated by the Iranian revolution and an Arab oil cut-off. Lines once again formed at gas stations and fuel prices doubled, intimidating hundreds of thousands of new-car buyers already suffering "sticker shock" from soaring prices. The market flip-flopped almost overnight, some 40 percent

of it switching from full-size cars to compacts. For Detroit, it was the start of a long nightmare.

For the T-Bird, the nightmare was just as bad. The downsized (and \$2700 cheaper) 1977-79 T-Birds had set new sales records. In fact, production had soared to 352,751 units for 1978, and even in the last year of its design cycle in 1979, 274,733 buyers drove a new T-Bird home.

For 1980, sales were a disaster. Output plummeted to 156,803 units, a 45-percent drop. Part of the problem was the overall market, but a 10-percent price increase to \$6432 for a base 'Bird certainly didn't help.

The 1980 Thunderbird was, like many other downsized cars of the era, smaller on the outside and bigger on the inside. Specifically, it had shed 775 pounds, rode a 5.6-inch-shorter 108.4-inch wheelbase, and measured 17.3 inches shorter and 4.4-inches narrower. Inside, the '80 T-Bird was also narrower, and now rated as a four-passenger car (rather than five), but

the good news was that those four people were more comfortable, particularly in the rear seat, where there was an extra—and critical—four inches of legroom. And luggage capacity was up by 2.6 cubic feet, to 17.7.

The Thunderbird was based on a modified version of Ford's versatile "Fox" platform, which had started out as the 1978 Ford Fairmont/Mercury Zephyr compacts. In 1979, this platform was adapted for the Mustang/Capri, and would also be used for other Ford products. Features included unit-body construction, MacPherson strut front suspension, and a solid rear axle with a four-bar link setup and coil springs. This resulted in better handling, but serious drivers ordered three additional options: a heavier-duty suspension with bigger anti-sway bars front and rear, revalved shocks, and stiffer rear springs; Michelin 220/55R-390 tires (on special alloy wheels); and Recaro seats.

The reduced weight meant that the new

The '80 Thunderbird was supposedly all-new, though it really was spun-off from the "Fox" platform used on the '78 Fairmont. Though downsized, it still looked like a T-Bird, especially from the front and rear. The mid-range Town Landau (*opposite page*) listed at \$10,036. The \$6432 base model (*right*) sports the optional Exterior Decor Group.

T-Bird could run with smaller engines, and indeed it did. Gone were the 460-, 400-, and 351-cid V-8s of the Seventies. For 1980, engine choices consisted of a 115-bhp 255 V-8 or the venerable 302 rated at 131 bhp. Though the power ratings hardly sounded impressive, performance wasn't too bad, at least with the 302: 0-60 mph in 10.4 seconds with the new FIOD automatic transmission and 3.08:1 rear gearing, 11.3 seconds with the three-speed automatic and 2.26:1 gears. The 255 was a bit slower: 0-60 in 12.9 seconds. The FIOD automatic, incidentally, was a technical triumph for Ford, as it was the first-in-the-industry four-speed automatic overdrive transmission, and it also boasted a lock-up torque converter. Allied with the 302 (it wasn't available with the 255 in 1980), it not only provided peppier performance, but it also yielded the best EPA mileage figures: 25 highway, 16 city.

There was more to like about the new 'Bird, particularly the high-tech goodies. Among them was an optional on-board diagnostic system to monitor fluid levels and exterior lights, an electronic instrument cluster, keyless locking (via five push-buttons and a microprocessor), and, of course, a premium sound system.

When all is said and done, however, the reputation of the 1980-82 Thunderbirds rests on its styling. Credit here goes to John J. Telnack, then executive director of Ford's North American mid-size and interior design studios, with help from William P. Boyer and Arthur J. Querfeld, both of whom had worked on the original '55 two-seater T-Bird. Not everybody liked the styling, and it is perhaps difficult in retrospect to imagine Telnack taking responsibility for the square, baroque 1980 T-Bird on the one hand and the aerodynamic '79 Mustang, '83 Thunderbird, and '86 Ford Taurus/Mercury Sable. That's not to say, however, that the blocky '80 T-Bird didn't get some aerodynamic attention. In fact, it spent 400 hours in the wind tunnel, with its original .58 coefficient of drag being ultimately reduced to .48, which was 13 percent better than the '59 model's .55. The improved C_d translated into



From the Back Seat

These may not have been the worst Thunderbirds, but they're certainly contenders. The engines generated more squeaks than thunder, and the styling is much closer to a brick than a bird. Hey, that's it! They should have called them "Squeakbricks."

Rick Popely

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." We've all heard that said before, usually about cars or women. The phrase comes to mind when I consider the 1980-82 Ford Thunderbirds. From the bolt-upright front end to the fat red plastic rear end, this car shouted ugly. Just about every design cliché ever devised was used: padded landau tops, opera windows, fake wire wheels, brushed aluminum "basket handle" roof trim, and lots of chrome. But these cars have something in common with the cars of the '50s—character. Most of us love the '50's cars, not because they were the most

beautiful autos ever built, but because of all the character of line that their designers gave them.

Now is the time to buy one of these overlooked, misunderstood glitz 'Birds. They're cheaper than dirt and parts are still available.

Frank Peiler

If any graduate of the Thunderbird school could be voted "least likely to become a collectible," this would be it. Yet considering the times for which it was built (and the pieces *from* which it was built), I suppose the "baroque 'Bird" really wasn't all that bad. As a daily driver, it offers the virtues of simple mechanicals along with a fair degree of classy comfort. However, cars of this type generally don't excite me, and the '80-'82 'Bird is no exception. Sure it's cheap; but so is white bread—and for the same reason.

Rick Cotta

Cheap Wheels



The '80 T-Bird (top left) featured a grille extension in the bumper. The '81 (top right), here an \$11,355 Heritage, didn't. Front headroom and legroom were increased slightly that year. For '82, the Town Landau (above) was described as an "An elegant experience," and it should have been because it carried a base sticker price of \$12,742, up \$1387 from 1981.

nearly one additional mile per gallon on the road.

The '80, begun in 1976, was to be unmistakably Thunderbird. That meant a long-hood/short-deck treatment and blocky C-pillars. The grille and taillights, meanwhile, carried an unmistakable T-Bird flavor, and the beltline was one inch lower. All in all, the '80 was a 7/8-size rendition of what had gone before. But was that what buyers really wanted? David E. Davis, writing in *Car and Driver*, said it was "a car with an identity crisis." Mike Knepper commented that "if you show some restraint . . . you leave the rolling-bordello look behind." Larry Griffin talked about "sheetmetal overkill and over-stuffed billows of upholstery and plastic." *Motor Trend* was kinder, saying that "this new

generation of a legendary marque seems destined not only to find acceptance with the traditional Thunderbird owner, but to attract a whole new category of buyers." *MT*, in another article, admitted that "the new T-Bird at first seems to carry less clout than the old one. It's just not as big as New Jersey anymore, and there's only a hint of the old car's screaming baroque architecture in styling." One could argue the last point, but it was generally agreed that the '80 T-Bird was less than it had been, and that the styling didn't work as well on the smaller chassis.

It's difficult to judge the 1980-82 Thunderbird based on sales results because of the economic bad times. As already noted, 1980 output was down 45 percent. Matters didn't improve for 1981, either, as the 'Bird now came with an 88-bhp 200-cid inline six as standard (a \$76 credit option beginning in mid-1980), although the V-8s were still around. External identification was provided by removing the below-bumper grill extension, and all models acquired the former extra-cost Exterior Luxury Group trim. Production, however,

skidded a further 45 percent, to 86,693 units.

By 1982, the T-Bird was in the final year of its styling cycle, and so it was a virtual rerun. A practical demonstration of Ford's work in automotive electronics showed up in the new "Tripfinder" option, a sophisticated quartz clock with a trip odometer. It kept tabs on fuel flow, vehicle speed, and real or elapsed time, from which it calculated instantaneous or average miles per gallon, fuel used, average trip speed, trip mileage, and journey time. It didn't help sales, though, as output tumbled 48 percent to 45,142 units—the poorest showing since 1975. Pricing didn't help, either, as the base sticker now read \$8492, up more than \$2000 over 1980.

The '82 T-Bird also received a lockup torque converter for the three-speed automatic and a new engine offering, a 232-cid V-6 that developed 112 horses. And because CAFE moved up to 24 mpg for 1982, the 302 was dropped, leaving the 120-bhp 255 V-8 as the most powerful engine. Ford insisted, however, that "The thunder's still there."

Three models were offered from 1980-82: base, Town Landau, and Heritage. The last was called the Silver Anniversary Edition in 1980, honoring the T-Bird's 25th birthday. The same basic package was carried over into 1981-82, renamed Heritage, and most every Thunderbird goodie came standard. But that was as it should be given the 1980 price of \$11,679, fully \$5247 more than the base 'Bird.

While the 1980-82 'Birds have been criticized for their downsized dimensions and baroque styling, they have a number of redeeming qualities. First among them is the styling. The 1980-82s were, after all, the last of the square-rigged, classic-look T-Birds—which makes them all the more interesting today. Other good points include decent performance (with the V-8s), reasonable fuel economy with unleaded gas, comfortable accommodations for four, and—on well-optioned models—all of the luxury features one could ever desire.

Cheap Wheels buyers should look first for the Silver Anniversary cars, and then for the Heritage models. Both are harder to find, but worth seeking out. Also worth considering are well-optioned cars with upgraded suspension and tires, four-speed automatic, and 302 V-8. Prices for these decade-old 'Birds are reasonable these days—attractive enough that, as Ford put it in 1980, ". . . you have chosen the greatest year yet to 'Spread your wings.'"

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