

# Ford Thunderbird

*Happy silver anniversary, Bird. Sure, you're getting older, but you're also getting better.*

• Given that time really is the ultimate test of all things, we at *Car and Driver* tip our editorial hat to the Ford Thunderbird. Back in 1955, when *C/D* was just a fledgling known as *Sports Cars Illustrated*, the T-Bird was getting off the ground as well. And today, 25 years later, it's still with us. If nothing else, you've got to respect its staying power.

Of course, today's T-Bird is a far cry from what it was a quarter-century ago. The trip through the time tunnel has seen it completely redesigned nine times. It's been cloaked in every body style short of a station wagon. And last fall it was finally downsized. But for all the monumental revisions to its substance, the T-Bird's essence has hardly changed a whit.

Marketing men would call the T-Bird story a sterling example of product positioning. Which simply means that buy-

ers understand what the T-Bird is and what it says about its owner. Everyone knows that the man who drives a T-Bird is a charger. He's elbowing his way up through the thundering herd, and working on a piece of the rock—two cars in front of the center-hall colonial and a pool in back. At least that's how the marketing litany goes.

Oddly enough, though the T-Bird has always looked like success on wheels, it actually went solid gold only four seasons ago. Ford deep-sixed the Mark V-based T-Bird then, in favor of the bulbous, LTD II-derived version, and slashed thousands from the sticker price. The result was a land rush of sales—328,000 in all—a sixfold increase over the year before. So strong was the revitalized T-Bird's allure that even during gas-short 1979 more than 320,000 upwardly mobile suburbanites suc-

cumbed—never mind that the T-Bird guzzled gas with no fear of tomorrow.

Though the T-Bird's decadent, 14-mpg fuel habit made downsizing imperative if Ford was to meet the ever tightening corporate average fuel-economy standards, Ford's marketing mavens were understandably loath to tamper with the newly uncovered formula for success. Nor was there much incentive to do anything radical; during the 1980 T-Bird's formative years, you'll remember, gas flowed freely and big cars were selling faster than Perrier. So Ford decided to play its hand conservatively, to mix in as much efficiency as possible without compromising any of the T-Bird's traditional opulent splendor.

On that score, we can report that Ford has accomplished its goal. The new T-Bird is indeed slimmer, trimmer, and more economical than past models.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

## THUNDERBIRD

And it still glitters like a zircon pinkie ring. (You were expecting Pinto-Spartan maybe?) Yes, the new T-Bird is, as the ad men are so fond of saying, still "unmistakably Thunderbird" from road to roof.

Meeting the design objectives meant putting the old Bird through what's become the standard Detroit downsizing process. Borrowing heavily from the hi-tech lessons learned in the Fairmont program, Ford lopped off about 15 inches of length, 4.5 inches of width, and 5.5 inches of wheelbase from last year's car. Those changes, coupled with advanced structural technology, resulted in a car that offers approximately the same interior space as before but weighs about 800 pounds less. The search for fuel efficiency of course led to the wind tunnel, where the basic design was strategically smoothed. And to squeeze the most out of every gallon, Ford blessed the optional 5.0-liter T-Bird with an optional four-speed automatic transmission that incorporates an overdrive top gear and a lockup torque converter.

While the changes seem drastic, the truth of the matter is that the T-Bird has finally caught up with its contemporaries in the personal-luxury class. The new model takes up about as much space as a Monte Carlo or a Grand Prix, both of which, you'll remember, were downsized back in 1978. And though the Bird's egregious mileage has been improved by nearly 30 percent with the base 4.2-liter V-8, it still manages only 18 mpg—which won't exactly make you a stranger to the local Exxon dealer.

Of course, the Thunderbird was never intended to battle the Rabbits of the world. Its long suit always was, and is, providing a slice of the automotive good life, American style. And civic responsibilities are strictly secondary.

As you can plainly see, that message is still written clearly in the T-Bird's sheetmetal. The look is crisper now, but the new styling still includes all of the visual clichés that identify this car as Ford's personal-luxury cruiser. The big, egg-crate grille, the hidden headlamps, the thick roof pillars, and the large, rectangular taillights all trumpet the family resemblance that Ford hopes will warm hearts from Westchester to Newport Beach.

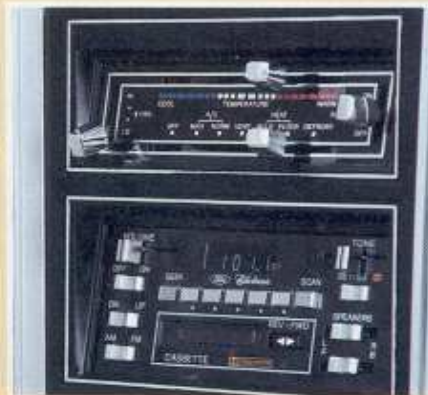
Familiarity is all well and good, but we're pleased to say it doesn't extend to the confines of the passenger compartment. Though last year's car was as big



as Texas, long rides in the rear seat were guaranteed to give you leg cramps. This year's interior, though slightly narrower and rated for four rather than five, is still a big step forward. Ford carved nearly three inches more rear-seat kneeroom out of it, which means that the T-Bird is a real car now, finally capable of carrying four average-sized adults in comfort. Those of you who are long of torso might find headroom marginal, but otherwise the accommodations are more than acceptable.

The T-Bird's newfound practicality and efficiency have in no way altered its mission in life. A mother lode of wretched excess is still yours for the asking. You can choose from dozens of interior fabrics, colors, and overstuffed seat styles. There are three half-vinyl roof treatments, two of which offer relief for opera-window junkies. And of course servo-assistants abound, and can be enlisted to lock doors, move seats, raise and lower windows, release the parking brake, maintain speed, adjust cabin temperature, and much, much more.

Our silver T-Bird test car was a





worthwhile example of what can be accomplished with some creative option-sheet checking. Without even working hard, we transformed the base \$6536 Thunderbird into a \$10,863 softly lined cruiser stocked with everything from a leather-wrapped wheel to a flip-up glass sunroof.

Worthy of special mention is a bevy of optional electronics that makes this the most informative and entertaining T-Bird in history. An on-board diagnostic system monitors fluid levels and exterior-lamp condition and reports back through a row of warning lights atop the dash. The electronic instrument cluster includes a digital-readout speedometer and a vertical-bar-graph fuel-level gauge, which both materialize from behind the black plastic panel face when you twist the ignition key. A digital clock reports the date as well as the hour and functions as a timer. The premium sound system, which consists of an electronic digital-readout AM/FM-stereo/cassette unit buttressed by a power amplifier and playing through six speakers, will make your Chuck Man-

gione tape sound better than any factory-installed system has a right to. But the fun-and-games *pièce de résistance* is the microprocessor-controlled keyless entry system. Five numbered buttons on the outside of the driver's door allow you to unlock the doors and trunk by tapping out a secret code number you've previously programmed. The Ford electronics guys admit with a smile that the system is there just to amuse your friends and baffle your enemies.

While the plethora of new gizmos provides more diversion than the T-Bird's ever had before, the biggest change is the way the new Bird drives. It's still an easy rider, but the marshmallow feel has been tuned out in favor of more supple control. Thanks to the weight loss and the trimmer dimensions, the new car is surprisingly nimble. The power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering sends back a trickle of feel, and it cuts a much more confident path down the Interstate as well.

But there's more. Ford has actually taken a shot at building a T-Bird for hard drivers. To get it, you must specify three separate option groups: a special handling suspension, with revalved shocks, fatter front and rear anti-sway bars, and stiffer rear springs; a set of sticky Michelin 220/55R-390 TRX tires on alloy rims; and a pair of Recaro (you read it right) seats.

The mere availability of such primo hardware shows what a change this car has been through. Unfortunately, though, this new side of the T-Bird's character is not fully developed. Ford's intentions were good enough, but the bits and pieces simply need more fine-tuning before they can add a full measure of driving pleasure. The normally terrific Recaro seats, for instance, were mounted at too sharp an angle for maximum comfort, and the excess of under-thigh support made the pedals a bit



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awkward to work. There's an annoying giggle in the ride. And though the upgraded chassis puts a two-fisted grip on smooth roads, the added adhesion seems to magnify its one big flaw: rubbery knees. When you bend it hard into a bumpy corner, the T-Bird porpoises into its bump stops too early, and loses its confidence. (Even so, we're so taken with its potential that we've decided to pump it full of demon tweaks that should finish the luxu road car Ford started on. Stay tuned.)

The T-Bird may not yet be up to chasing supercoups through your favorite esses, but it is a pretty soothing conveyance. Equipped with the 5.0-liter V-8 and the FIOD (Ford Integral Over-drive) four-speed automatic transmission, our car murmured its way around town and spoke softly on the highway. This is partly due to the 0.67:1 over-



*After a quarter-century, the T-Bird has finally learned road manners.*



## COUNTERPOINT

• This Thunderbird reminds me of myself as a high-school football player—kind of goofy and uncoordinated. I absolutely cannot predict what the steering is going to do, or where it may take me, when I have Ford's personal-luxury cruiser committed to a 65-mile-per-hour bend on a country road. Without the Recaro seats it's a marshmallow. With the Recaro seats it's something else altogether. As near as I can tell, the Recaros are still and supportive enough that you suddenly become aware of lots of busyness and jittery vibrations that the stock seat in its billowy softness damps out. Also, if memory serves me, the optional Recaro seats in BMWs and Porsches are less aggressive than this one. The side bolsters are high and rigid in this seat, it's tilted back too sharply, and I'm damned if I can imagine your typical Southern California matron clambering in to go meet her analyst at the motel. Fuel economy is impressive, and the new four-speed auto-magic transmission seems like progress, but the Thunderbird has become a car with an identity crisis. Underneath this confusion are the perfectly good underpinnings of the Fairmont and the Mustang, but they're overwhelmed by the T-Bird cosmetics.

—David E. Davis, Jr.

It's difficult to put away those strong impressions, those mind sets, established over the years. But that's what you have to do when considering this Thunderbird. See, the very mention of the name makes you want to snigger, doesn't it? Bulbous, overweight, wallowing ship of the Interstate. Egregious overstatement of the big-is-better and luxury-means-opulence philosophy. I'm not here to tell

you the Thunderbird is now out there on the leading edge of hi-tech car stuff, but I can tell you with assurance that the new Bird is not only a lot better than any of its forebears, it's head and shoulders above maybe 50 percent of the new crop. You can still go tacky-luxu if you must, but if you show some restraint, as we did with our version, you leave the rolling-bordello look behind. With TRX and Recaros, the superwhammy radio, the trick electronic instruments, four-speed automatic, and the best steering feel Ford has yet offered, the new Bird becomes a pretty nice package, and one a car person will not have to make excuses for.

—Mike Knepper

In one form or another, it sometimes seems tragedy is all around us. I feel that way, albeit with tongue in cheek, when I'm sitting in the Thunderbird, operating its controls. I'm enjoying the controls because they're nice to work with and because the car has a good subjective feel about it, overall. But it seems a shame Ford felt obligated to wrap these good feelings in sheetmetal overkill and over-stuffed billows of upholstery and plastic. I really like the fact that the T-Bird is trimmer and more athletic. No argument there, it's a step forward. I just can't stomach the glossy-flossy gimcrackery that's draped hither and yon around the insides, and the ersatz heavy-hitter sculpting, grilling, and lensing pasted over decent mechanicals.

It's nice to think that today's Thunderbird customers might approve of the car's improved manners. Maybe they'll even figure out what to do with them. Now if they could just get along without High Schlock.

—Larry Griffin

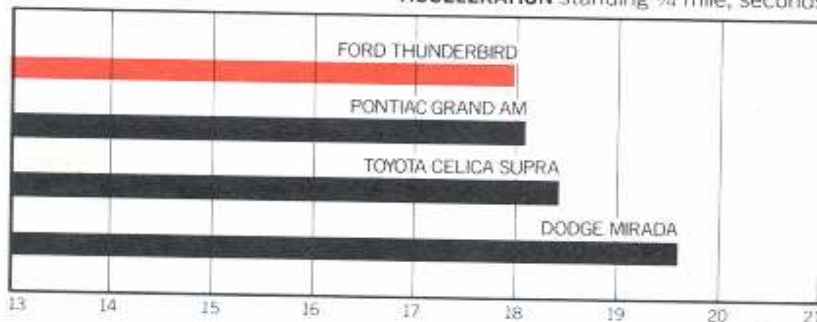
drive top gear, which drops the revs down to only 2000 rpm at 70 mph. The long top gear also enabled Ford to lower (numerically raise) the final-drive ratio from 2.26:1 to 3.08 without hurting the 5.0-liter's 17-mpg rating. The gear change, in turn, cuts the zero-to-sixty time to 11.1 seconds—which our early-season testing showed to be an improvement of about a second. And anything that makes more speed without using more gas is okay with us.

For that matter, everything about the 25th-anniversary T-Bird is better. It's roomier and more comfortable. It's much more judicious with fuel. It's shot through with a healthy dose of hi-tech hardware. And it's the closest the T-Bird has ever come to being a driver's car. By all accounts it's easily the best T-Bird of the last 25 years. But—and this is a big but—for all its improvements it's only drawn even with the competition in terms of performance, handling, and, most important, fuel economy. Which leaves us feeling a little schizoid about the new-era Thunderbird. On the one hand, it represents progress. But given the tenor of the times, we also wish Ford had set its sights higher.

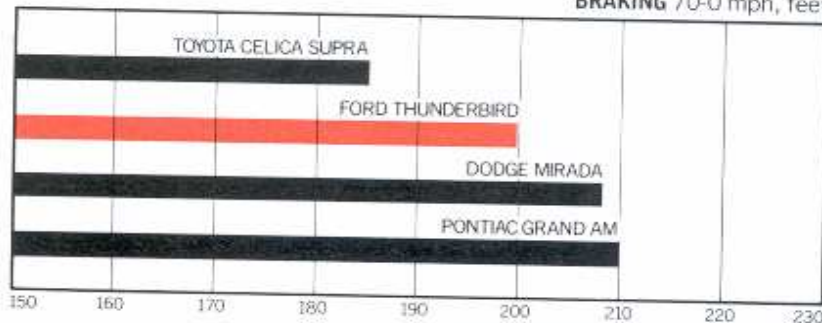
—Rich Ceppos

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CAR and DRIVER

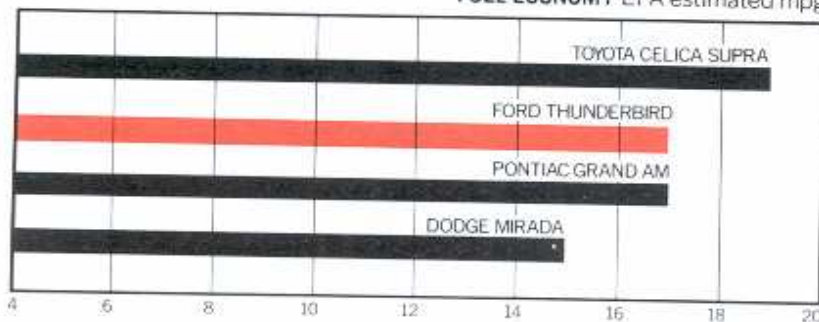
ACCELERATION standing 1/4 mile, seconds



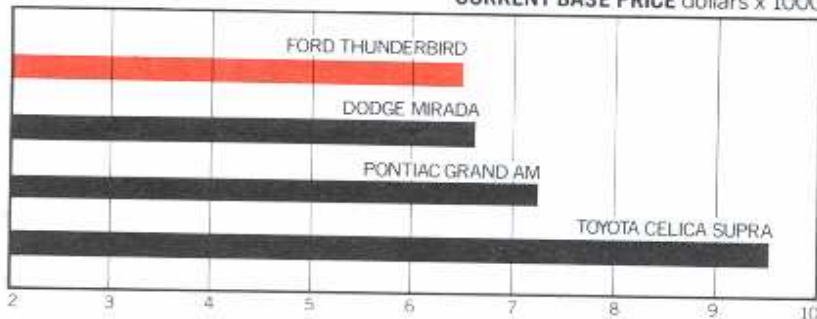
BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



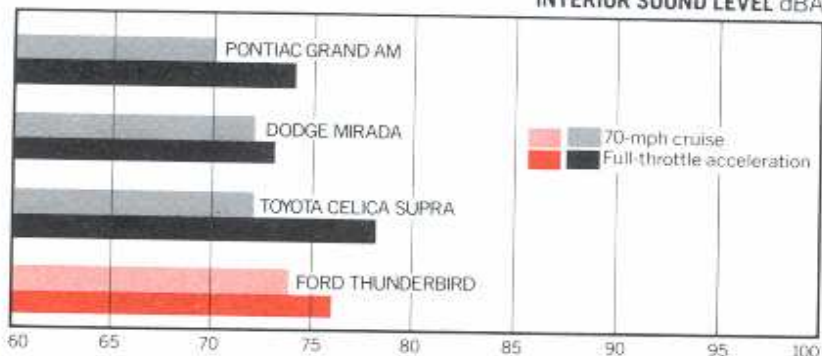
FUEL ECONOMY EPA estimated mpg



CURRENT BASE PRICE dollars x 1000



INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL dBA



FORD THUNDERBIRD

Manufacturer: Ford Motor Company  
P.O. Box 2053  
Dearborn, Michigan 48121

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door sedan

Price as tested: \$10,863

Options on test car: base Ford Thunderbird, \$6536; air conditioning, \$571; 220/55R-390 TRX tires and alloy wheels, \$528; electronic AM/FM-stereo/cassette with premium sound package, \$479; interior decor group, \$348; electronic instrument cluster, \$313; Recaro seats, with center console, \$254; flip-up glass sunroof, \$219; F100 four-speed automatic transmission, \$156; 5.0-liter V-8, \$150; power windows, \$136; automatic speed control, \$129; power door locks, \$113; keyless entry system, \$106; diagnostic warning lights, \$50; handling package, \$23; other, \$752.

ENGINE

Type: V-8, water-cooled, cast-iron block and heads, 5 main bearings

Bore x stroke	4.00 x 3.00 in, 102 x 76mm
Displacement	302 cu in, 4940cc
Compression ratio	8.4:1
Carburetion	1x2-bbl Ford
Valve gear	pushrods, overhead valves, hydraulic lifters
Power (SAE net)	131 bhp @ 3600 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	231 lbs-ft @ 1600 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission	4-speed, automatic		
Final-drive ratio	3.08:1		
Gear	Ratio	Mph/1000 rpm	Max. test speed
I	2.47	9.6	38 mph (4000 rpm)
II	1.47	16.1	64 mph (4000 rpm)
III	1.00	23.7	95 mph (4000 rpm)
O.D.	0.67	35.3	110 mph (3100 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Wheelbase	108.4 in
Track, F/R	58.1/57.0 in
Length	200.4 in
Width	74.1 in
Height	53.0 in
Ground clearance	4.9 in
Curb weight	3360 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R	59.5/40.5%
Fuel capacity	17.5 gal

SUSPENSION

F: independent, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-sway bar  
R: rigid axle, 4 trailing links, coil springs, anti-sway bar

STEERING

Type: rack-and-pinion, power-assisted  
Turns lock-to-lock: 3.2  
Turning circle curb-to-curb: 40.1 ft

BRAKES

F: 10.1-in dia vented disc  
R: 9.0 x 1.8-in cast-iron drum  
Power assist: vacuum

WHEELS AND TIRES

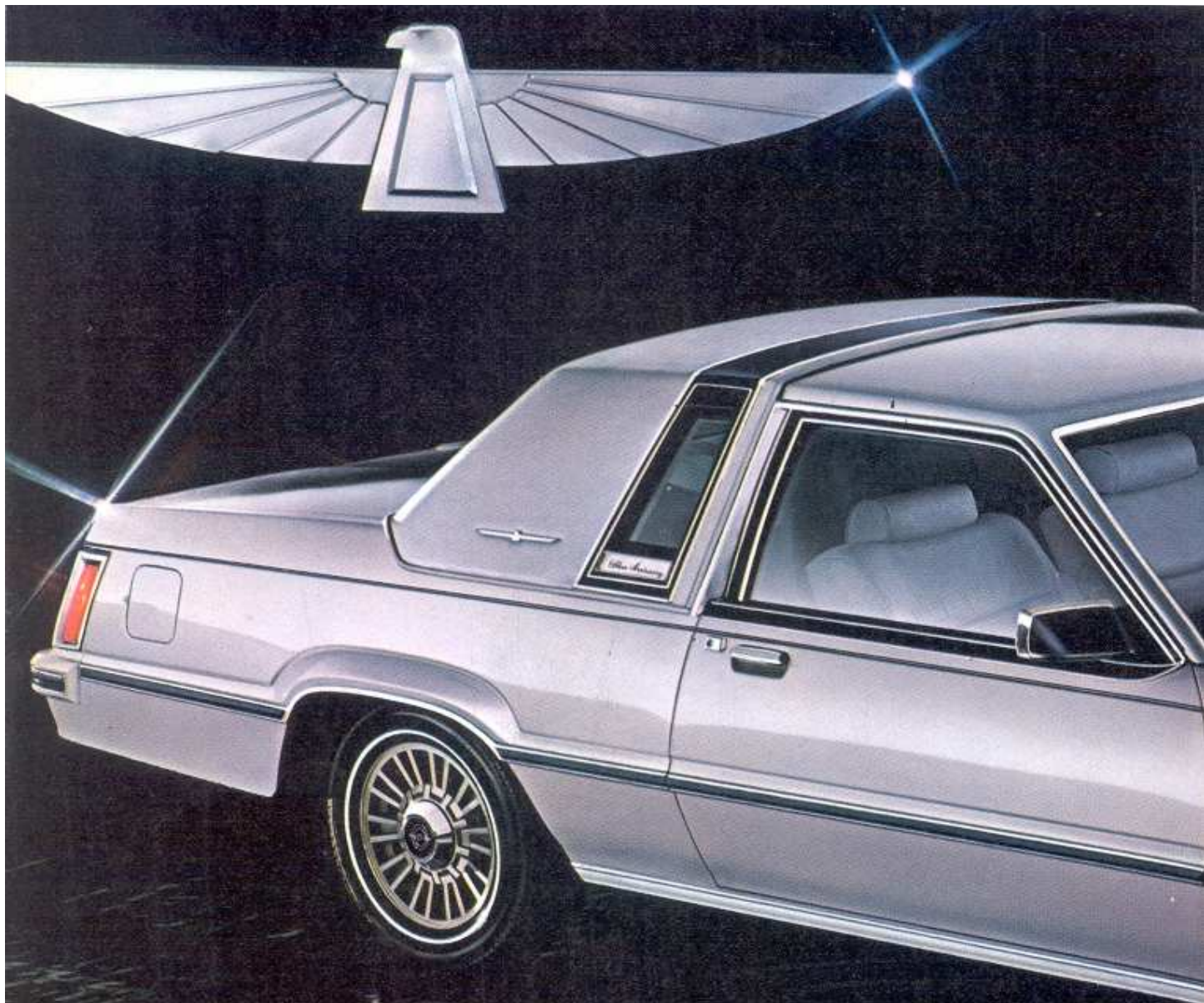
Wheel size: 5.9 x 15.4 in (150 x 390mm)  
Tire make and size: Michelin TRX, 220/55R-390

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle: 49 dBA  
Full-throttle acceleration: 76 dBA  
70-mph cruising: 74 dBA  
70-mph coasting: 73 dBA

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.4
40 mph	5.4
50 mph	8.0
60 mph	11.1
70 mph	15.0
80 mph	20.6
90 mph	29.1
Standing 1/4-mile	18.0 sec @ 76 mph
Top speed	110 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	200 ft
EPA estimated fuel economy	17 mpg



*The 1980 Silver Anniversary Thunderbird*  
**The Proudest Bird of All**

The Silver Anniversary Thunderbird grows naturally out of twenty-five years of triumphant Thunderbirds.

In honor of that occasion, we have produced the Silver Anniversary Thunderbird. It is, in a word, a knockout.

Both the inside and the outside are all silver. A silver bird representing the ultimate in Thunderbird's sophisticated automotive design.

Many Thunderbird options are standard. AM-FM stereo, air conditioning, power windows, power brakes, power seats, white





sidewalls, power antenna and speed control.

And many individualized options are standard on the Silver Anniversary Thunderbird: owner's nameplate, digital speedometer, keyless entry system, garage door opener.

Like all 1980 Thunderbirds, it was conceived and produced in a new contemporary size. This size and the new automatic overdrive transmission which is standard on this car, optional on other Thunderbirds, result in excellent ratings of **17** EPA est. MPG—29 est. hwy. MPG\*.

If you're looking for a car that expresses you, consider joining the many who find Thunderbird an expression of their individuality. The Silver Anniversary Thunderbird. *Road Test* magazine awards Thunderbird "best domestic car for 1980!"

\*Compare this to other cars. Your mileage may differ depending on speed, weather and trip length. Actual highway mileage will be lower than estimates. California ratings lower.

**THUNDERBIRD**

FORD DIVISION

