



JOHN GATES

Thunderbird



Our two previous countrywide tests have proved extremely popular with the readers and the staff of Motor Trend. The third vehicle to be selected for one of our long-term evaluations was the all-new Ford Thunderbird. This year, the T-Bird is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and Ford engineers have given it another major downsizing as a birthday gift. While still a mid-sized vehicle, it has lost 5.5 inches of wheelbase, 17 inches of length, and 700 pounds. Unitized construction has replaced the previous body-on-frame configuration, and a new TR suspension system is being offered for the first time.

The 1980 Thunderbird represents the

ninth generation of the marque. We wanted to find out just how well Ford had managed to pull off its latest experiment in personalized transportation, so we ordered the latest 'Bird with all of the important luxury and performance options: 5.0-liter engine, TR suspension, Recaro seats, electronic dash, and the Luxury Exterior Group. The whole thing was trimmed in a monochromatic rendition of Bittersweet-Glow metallic.

When we first saw the car, we were frankly a tad uncertain as to how the fruits of styling chief Jack Telnack's labors were going to play throughout the country. Although design input was contributed by William P. Boyer and Arthur I. Querfeld, both of whom had been instrumental in drawing up the original T-

Bird, one would be hard pressed to point out many carryovers in the new car. Ford touts the new Thunderbird's styling as the "leading edge of contemporary design." We at MT view it as slightly controversial, to put it mildly. Early sales figures indicate that people are buying the new 'Bird, but they're not exactly storming into their local dealerships.

During the course of our countrywide testing, we put the Thunderbird into the hands of five staff members. Throughout the course of four months, it alternately lived on the East and West Coasts and made two cross-country jaunts in the interim. We managed to run up close to 15,000 miles on the car, exposing it to the entire range of climatic and highway conditions. The results follow.

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"The fact that, in not many more years, no one will produce a car like this makes me sad indeed..."

by Ted Orme

Cursing and whining, I reluctantly agreed to my editor's simple dictate. "Just drive it home and see how you like it," he said, with a twisted grin. It wasn't that I had anything against T-Birds, but, cripes, home was 2600 miles away, this was the dead of winter. I'm pushing 40, and...

All I could think of as I positioned the car due east, away from the bright California sun and into the threatening gray murk of the hinterland, was that in the time it would take me to drive to the state line, a fast plane would have already set me down only 10 miles from my snug bungalow on the banks of the Potomac.

Yet, by the time I got to Needles, California, my attitude had changed. I had settled into a nice driving mood—radio turned on, mind turned off, body relaxed and comfortable. The little Escort radar detector sat alertly on the dash, and the car was eating up miles with aplomb. For the first of many times to come, I found myself thinking, "Damn, this is a nice car."

As I cut farther into the magnificent and varied U.S. landscape, my appreciation of the T-Bird grew. The car tracked effortlessly at all speeds, steering was precise and responsive, and the brakes brought the car to a controllable halt in a respectable distance. The optional 302cid V-8 felt very strong compared to engines in other cars of its



class. And, from a dead stop, the T-Bird could even elicit an almost-forgotten squeal from its rear tires. Teamed with Ford's new overdrive automatic transmission, the car was also surprisingly efficient. My top mark for the trip was 24 mpg, with an overall average of 20 mpg at speeds well in excess of the double-nickel.

The TR-type tires, cast aluminum wheels, and beefed-up shocks and sway bars gave the car a sporting character that I liked. It cornered flatter and with less understeer with these options, but it rode decidedly stiffer. In fact, one rough stretch of Route 40 made me think I was riding on railroad ties; nor did the car ever miss letting me know about every little tar strip on the highway. But such annoyances seemed like a small price to pay for an overall feeling of mechanical competence and tight construction.

Inside the car, I got the feeling of spaciousness. Visibility was excellent with the exception of the heavy C-pillars, which created definite over-the-shoulder blind spots. The ride was unusually quiet when the "premium" sound system was off. When it was on, this six-speaker electronic-search stereo with Dolby and power amplifier was as good as any original equipment unit I've heard. Also impressive was the daz-

zling display of electronic instrumentation and options, which ran the gamut from very functional and well designed to purely silly (does one really need a coded keyless entry system?). They all worked perfectly, however, and it was easy to understand why Ford leads in this category. My only real complaint was with the row of diagnostic warning lights positioned above the main panel, where they were partially blocked from view by the steering wheel and hard to read in the bright sunlight.

The single most wonderful option for cross-country driving, or any driving for that matter, were the optional Recaro seats. My first impression, and that of most others who tried them later, was that they were unduly hard. But after logging 2600 miles in four days in them, with less muscle fatigue than I would have thought possible, I never wanted to part with them. They were rather like the car: the more time you spent in them, the more you appreciated them.

By the time I reached my friendly little home, I had pronounced the Thunderbird a premier touring machine. The only question remaining was, would this very favorable impression hold up in everyday family use?

A month later, my opinion of the car was still high, with a few detractions.



"Downsizing has unquestionably improved the breed..."

by Bob Nagy

Participation in an *MT* country-wide test is always a learning experience. In this particular go-round, I drew the intensive course: a glorious 10-day excursion through 11 states and two seasons. It began in the cold and snow of Detroit and ended up where all good automotive stories should, in the sun and fun of Los An-

After all, finding a perfect car is even rarer than finding a 10-rated woman.

The overdrive automatic, it turned out, liked the open road a lot more than it liked the city. It tended to get confused in the 35-mph range about whether it was supposed to be in 3rd or overdrive. The result was a bothersome *thunking* back and forth. Flaws in the pinstripes and door trim and the cheap, ill-fitting rug and cardboard panels in the trunk became more glaring when you lived with them awhile.

Friends and neighbors were dismayed at the nearly \$11,000 price tag, but I explained that could be shaved considerably with a more judicious selection of options. And some, like me, didn't get off on the styling but thought the performance impressive. Others went the other way and couldn't see why Ford would want to screw up a fine car with those awful seats and that stiff suspension.

But, after a month and almost 5000 miles of all kinds of driving under all kinds of conditions, I can say with confidence that this gutsy, agile and comfortable car satisfied my needs and those of my family just fine, except for one fatal factor—fuel economy.

A few years ago, this car would have been a monster on the sales charts. But, let's face it, a 16- to 17-mpg town car just won't do anymore. Despite the new shape, size and weight of the "all new" Thunderbird, events of the past year have rendered it an anachronism before it ever hit the streets. Detroit knows this and is embarked on a course of drastic change at full speed.

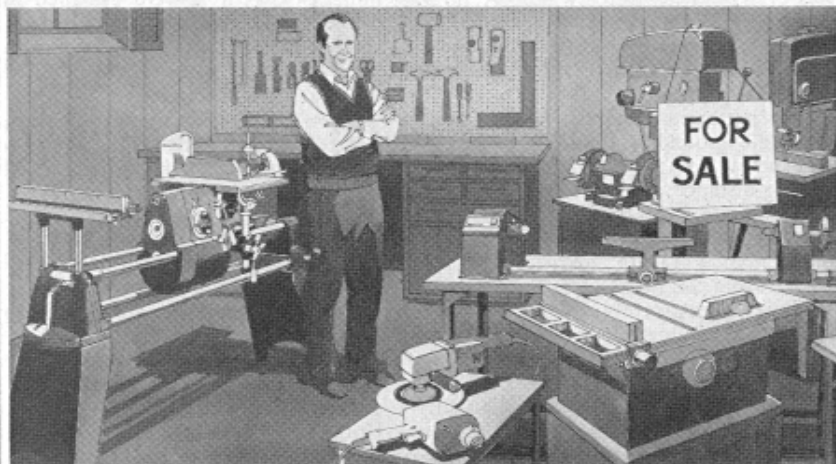
Maybe that is what made me so sad when I finally turned in the T-Bird. From my seat in Washington, I have chronicled the laws and trends that would affect those changes. I was ready to accept and, in fact, embrace the new breed of small, fuel-efficient autos. But, damn, that Bird was a nice way to get around. And the fact that, in not many more years, no one will produce a car like it makes me sad indeed.

geles. The last three days were the comprehensive final exam. During that period, I averaged more than 700 miles per day. Thanks to the vigilance of numerous state police, this *per diem* quota was met at a far more leisurely pace than I had hoped for.

It was a reunion of sorts for the 'Bird and me. Our first meeting had come at the Car of the Year testing, and I remember not being too impressed with it then. This time, I came away with a much better appreciation of what the car is about.

Downsizing has unquestionably improved the breed. Along with the passing of the Thunderboat Era has come some overdue emphasis on this car's handling ability—and kudos are certainly in order on that front. The new

Jack McAlister had \$12,000 worth of power tools.



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variable-ratio power-steering unit directing virtually zero scrub radius geometry provided excellent road feel and stability, even in heavy crosswinds. A large part of the credit must be awarded to the equally new TR suspension package. It's not the kind of thing that will please hard-liners on either side of the luxury/performance controversy, but as a middle ground, I found it to be an outstanding compromise and well suited to long-distance running.

We specified the optional 5.0-liter engine for our test car. While the 302's performance rating has long since passed from the ranks of impressive, it's still plenty respectable. Coupled with the 4-speed automatic overdrive transmission, it delivered city mileage in the 16-18 range against a 17-mpg EPA rating. The highway figures were a bit surprising. The EPA rates this powertrain at 29 mpg on the open road, but I averaged closer to 20 mpg. Even my best tank only worked out to 22.9 mpg. I would like to offer a few kind words for the transmission, however; it engaged and shifted with a characteristic smoothness that is almost unprecedented in today's automatics. Like the rest of the powertrain, it operated in near silence.

It's hard for me to believe Ford spent nearly four years refining the styling of this car. Extensive wind tunnel testing may have helped create a shape that is remarkably free from wind noise at cruising speeds, but viewed head on, it still reminds me of Joe Frazier's battered countenance the day after the Thrilla in Manila.

The T-Bird's full-tilt trim package included the Exterior Luxury Group. Besides a pair of remote-control outside mirrors, which proved to be remarkably handy, it included a padded landau

half-top with narrow opera windows. I hate padded half-tops, and this one merited special ire. Not only did the thing look as if it were designed for a car twice the size, but the overly massive C-pillar created a rear-quarter blind spot that someone could literally drive a truck through.

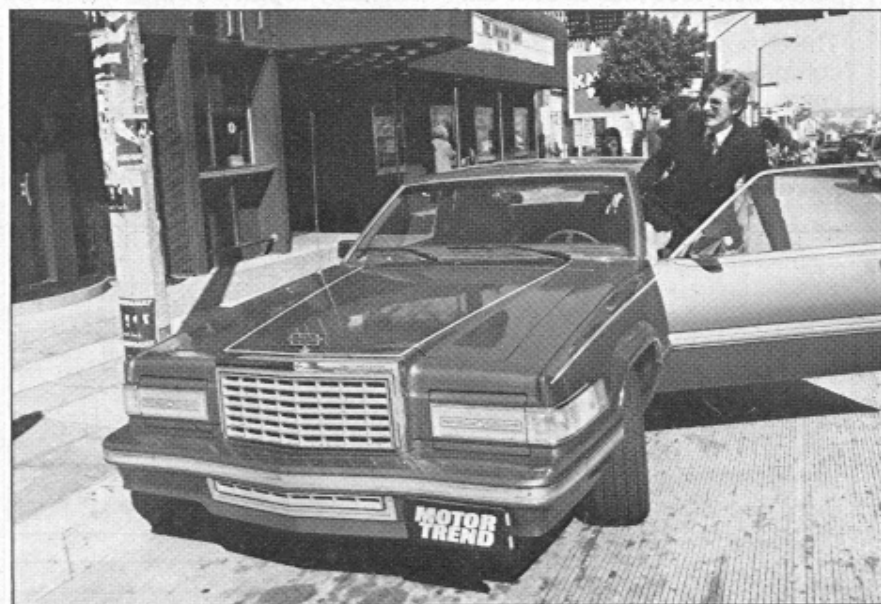
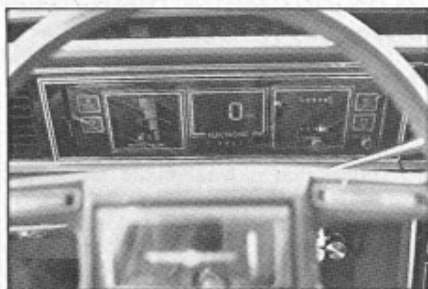
The 'Bird's new interior also needs some serious work. While quite comfortable and reasonably roomy, it was a borderline ergonomic nightmare. The driving position was fairly pleasant, and the optional Recaro seats receive my eternal praise and thanks for a job well done. Ford also produces what I feel to be the most convenient cruise control on the market, and it, too, earns high marks. Beyond these items, one was forced to put up with many minor inconveniences that added up to major irritations when taken in long, steady doses. Examples include seatbelts that wrapped directly across the seatback adjuster wheel, a shift lever ideally positioned to encounter one's right kneecap on a regular basis, and a steering wheel rim that virtually obliterated most of the idiot lights.

The biggest disappointment was the digital electronic instrument package. The aqua-colored LED readouts were striking at night, but as ambient light

levels rose, their readability went down the tube. The problem was further complicated if one wanted to wear sunglasses. All this was made worse by the plexiglass dust guard that covered the instrument cluster and threw a double reflection of the steering column and its various appendages right back into the dashboard.

I also found it intriguing that someone actually went to all the trouble to develop a digital gas gauge that was just as inaccurate as a mechanical unit. This particular one was periodically affected by cold weather, indicating less fuel in the tank than was really present until the car's interior temperature got up to a comfortable level. With the T-Bird's fine climate control, this took only a few minutes.

Our test 'Bird was outfitted with an extensive list of optional equipment, and it wore a commensurately healthy price tag of near \$11,000. But the base T-Bird lists for a far more reasonable \$6432. By passing on some of the cosmetic items and the electronic dash, it's possible to put together a reasonably decent little piece for under \$9000. At that price, I think the Thunderbird represents one of the more viable automotive buys of its kind. It isn't for me, thanks; but it might be for you.



"We'd rather spend \$11,000 buying an original Thunderbird restoration . . ."

by Jim McCraw

The first time I saw a Thunderbird was in spring of 1955 on a boulevard in Norfolk, Virginia. It was a red convertible with a white top and white interior. Norfolk is a Navy town, and young naval officers were as much caught up in the sports car phenomenon as anyone. The officer driving the T-Bird was in his dress whites, and his companion was a wonderful brunette partially wearing a navy dress. By the time the light changed and they sped off to the officer's club dance, I was in love—and not with the brunette.

A mere 25 years later, my own won-

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derful brunette and I experienced a 1980 Thunderbird, and we found almost no parallel between the original and the 25th Anniversary T-Bird. On the contrary, the two are almost perpendicular. The original car was a great deal of style wrapped around some perfectly ordinary Ford running gear; the 1980 version is a great deal of technological style wrapped by a gaudy 2-door sedan.

By the time we got to test the T-Bird, it had been thoroughly broken in by Ted Orme and Bob Nagy. When it came to live with us in Hollywood's apartment-lined streets, it had accumulated 12,000 odometer miles but not a single discernible rattle. The first thing we found out about the new T-Bird was that it is wider than it seems. If we parked it just the wrong way, the left side mirror cleared the carport post, but the left rear fender flare didn't.

The \$441 Michelin TR-type tire and wheel option and the \$254 front Recaro bucket seats were the key options on the car for our money, along with the \$150 302cid engine and \$138 overdrive transmission. But we thought the \$479 asked for the AM/FM stereo system with Dolby and the amplifier system could be better spent in the auto radio aftermarket. We felt the same about most of the other options from the giant list, such as keyless entry, power

locks and the electronic instrument cluster. We also felt the tilt steering column should be mandatory with the Recaro seat option, to maximize driver comfort. But even without that last detail, the T-Bird was a pleasure to drive, with quick steering and a minimum of body roll.

The new T-Bird has only three basic powertrains: the base 255cid V-8 with automatic, the 302cid V-8 with automatic, and the 302cid V-8 with overdrive automatic. A 2.26:1 final drive ratio is standard with the first two; a 3.08:1 is used with the third. They give the 130-horsepower 302 engine a quick, solid windup through the gears. The car never felt anemic or underpowered in L.A. city traffic and was extremely quiet at freeway speeds; yet, it never got better than about 22 mpg, although the EPA rated it at 17 city, 29 highway. The mileage was consistent with reports from other *MT* drivers but well under our expectations, since a Lincoln Mark with the same drivetrain and 800 pounds more weight gets about the same mileage on the *MT* test loop.

All of the things the new Thunderbird does well on curving country roads are more or less forgotten when the car gets stuck in a strictly urban environment for a couple of weeks, as it did in our case. In that setting, the T-Bird be-

came a short-trip transportation vehicle and grocery-getter, a vehicle for business lunches, press conferences and entertainment trips, all of which suited it well. The interior accommodated four adults in soft, spacious comfort; the doors were wide, and rear seat entry/exit was painless.

The thing we liked least about the new Thunderbird was its lack of the kind of styling that made classics of the 1955-57 2-seat series. It may have rack-and-pinion steering, all-new suspension, less weight, more interior space, better aerodynamics and a wonderful optional suspension, but its interior and exterior designs were strange even for a Hollywood couple. There are ways buyers can minimize the problem, such as ordering the car without the exterior moldings and pudgy vinyl roof cap and specifying a solid dark color, but, even at that, the front end, the instrument panel, and the rear end treatments were a little too far to the left for our tastes. And, if that's as good as it gets, there was no room in our Hollywood carport for a 1980 T-Bird. Not even a red convertible with a white top and a white interior, if one were available. We'd rather spend \$11,000 to buy an original Thunderbird restoration, or put out a little more and buy two Mustangs optioned to the roofs.

“The 'Bird is one of the few cars I've driven lately that makes me smile . . .”

by Peter Frey

The Thunderbird presents me with a dilemma. In the past, I have damned its fraternal twin, the Mustang, for its shoddy execution of an excellent concept. The confusion is that, although both cars are a product of the same light-and-cheap-with-a-dazzling-dose-of-future-tech design, I like the Thunderbird. A lot.

I'm a city boy and spend most of my driving time in a high-density urban environment. However, within Los Angeles, there are less-populous hilly areas, which are traversed by winding roads that offer some relief from the traffic. These are the roads I choose for my daily commute, and I've discovered the Thunderbird has qualities that make it adaptable to handling curves as well as freeways.

The trimness of the new Thunderbird



is well suited to maneuvering it in close quarters. The optional TR suspension, which would seem to apply more to winding roads, is useful for city driving because it gives the car tremendous evasive powers. When traffic comes to a screeching halt in front of you, a firm squeeze on the brake pedal brings the car to a swift, straight stop, with none

of the nose-dive, smoking-tire, out-of-control dramatics that most American cars exhibit. When somebody pulls out of a parking space directly in front of you, a glance in the mirrors and a quick flick of the wheel darts the Thunderbird instantly out of harm's way.

While the 302cid V-8 and 4-speed automatic transmission combination is not

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impressive in dragstrip terms, it does provide a smooth-running, smooth-shifting responsiveness under ordinary driving conditions. In any but a highway cruising situation, the selector lever is best left in 3rd gear, which eliminates the hesitation produced by the 4-3 downshift that occurs every time a little throttle is applied.

In-town fuel economy was approximately 18 mpg. Around *MT's* 73-mile fuel loop, which includes both city and highway driving, the Thunderbird, driven conservatively, managed 23.1 mpg.

To cope with the bumper-to-bumper aspect of city life, the interior of the Thunderbird has been designed to provide a comfortable retreat from the noise- and air-polluted environment. An extensive sound insulation package results in a pleasingly low interior noise level. If library-like silence is not completely to your liking, you can fill the void with music from the best OEM sound system currently available. If the weather is too hot or cold, the superb ventilation system will provide volumes of any temperature air you desire.

The winding-road behavior of the Thunderbird has taken the car a quantum leap above its ancestors. No Thunderbird and, for that matter, few American cars have ever approached this level of handling. All credit is due the TR suspension/wheels/tires option, which produces flat, predictable cornering at speeds, on roads rough or smooth, wet or dry. The tradeoff is increased levels

of road noise and harshness, but not so much that anyone with an ounce of sportin' blood wouldn't gladly endure.

I found the optional Recaro driving seats superbly comfortable, and they offered the absolutely necessary side support required to make use of the Thunderbird's lateral g capabilities. The availability of both the suspension system and Recaros is a forward-looking first for a domestic manufacturer, and whoever made the go-ahead decision deserves a round of applause.

You'll notice I haven't offered criticisms of the car. That's because I haven't many, and they are all overridden by the pleasures the car offers. I find the overall styling pleasing. It's a contemporary sportiness that makes people turn their heads as you drive by, a sportiness marred only by a slightly "thick" look to the rear quarters, a result of the flat and nearly vertical rocker panels. The styling of the roof in the C-pillar area produces a bit of a blind spot in the driver's lane-change and parallel-parking vision.

The interior is dominated by the space-age digital-readout dashboard. The merits of such electronic wizardry can be debated, but the dashboard does convey all the necessary information and imparts a sense of the future I find enjoyable and consistent with the tight, earthbound fighter-plane feel of the car. There is occasionally some reflected glare that makes the readouts hard to see, but this doesn't happen frequently

enough to damn the entire concept.

There are other areas of the car that reflect the cost-cutting techniques employed by Detroit these days. The fit and finish of the body panels and trim pieces are occasionally casual, and the paint is only mediocre. The trunk is roughly finished, with a cut-and-fold cardboard panel covering the taillamp assemblies. Such flaws must be considered within the conventional definition of a high-line luxury car, which the Thunderbird certainly is, but their influence is reduced by the car's overall mechanical competence.

Perhaps I'm placing too much emphasis on the Thunderbird's road abilities and not enough on the more conventional concerns, but the 'Bird is one of the few cars I've driven lately that makes me smile. It responds to my every input with firm, direct precision. It tells me what's going on when the rubber meets the road, without being obtrusive. It cradles me firmly, sings to me and engulfs me in the pleasures of driving a worthy machine. No other current American car feels like this Thunderbird.

The Ford Motor Company has taken a considerable gamble with this new kind of car, of which the Mustang, Thunderbird, and even the Lincoln Continental are examples. Ford is apparently trying for a fusion of the best of American and European automotive design, and, with the Thunderbird at least, they've come up with a winner.

*"It also
has . . . better
handling than any
T-Bird of the
past . . ."*

by Chuck Nerpel

I have been in this automotive journalism business long enough to remember way back when Ford introduced the first Thunderbird. In 1955, this new car was the thing, a snappy 2-seater available in either coupe or convertible. In fact, I tested one for *Motor Trend* at that time and wish now I had bought it and held onto it; at today's prices a convertible in mint condition is worth a cool 13 or 14 grand—about what a Ferrari cost in those good old days.

In those same good old days, bigger was soon to be equated with better. By 1958, Thunderbirds had grown a back seat, longer wheelbase and overall length. From then on, T-Birds became larger and more luxurious.

Then came the gas crunch, and downsizing was the name of the game.



The 1980 T-Bird, with a Fairmont-size chassis and a 302cid V-8, is more like its predecessors. Our test car, equipped with the Recaro front bucket seat option and TR Michelin tire and suspension package, was a great highway cruiser with the mileage-stretching 4-

speed automatic transmission that slipped into overdrive at about 35 mph and dropped rpm to a more fuel-efficient range.

As one who likes to hunt and fish a little farther afield than the local lake, I count good gas mileage and long-trip

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cruising comfort as very important. In the new T-Bird, there was space for the rest of my family—one thing the old Bird was a bit stingy on—and a trunk that held everything from a six-man tent to a week's supply of food and clothes. Its gas mileage also pleased me.

Most of those long trips to the outdoors are not all freeway. There are stretches of unpaved road, so I need a car with good handling and tractability. I also like a car that's fun to drive safely on mountain roads. The Thunderbird was ideally suited to this type of travel. It handled extremely well on winding roads and did not feel as if it would come apart when the going got rough.

The countrywide test car ended up with 15,000 miles on its odometer and was still as rattle-free as when it was tested as a Car of the Year nominee last November. I found that it also ran as well after those 15,000 miles as it did after the initial break-in tune-up.

My main criticism of the new T-Bird was its instrumentation. The digital readout speedometer was very hard to see in certain light conditions, especially when the sun was coming from near head-on and reflecting the lower part of my clothing onto the glass panel cover. The fuel gauge was a series of lines that disappeared as fuel was consumed, which seemed a strange way of keeping track of things. Up along the top edge of the padded cowl was a narrow row of little windows that showed engine and lighting function failures. These were hidden behind the steering wheel rim—at least they were for me—and required some hunching in order to see. At night, with the lights on, they attracted my attention, but in the daylight they were hard to make out—or even be aware of. With all that Ford has going for its new Thunderbird, I see no reason to replace conventional gauges with this digital stuff, either as a space-age gimmick or an added selling point. The radio was located so low on the dash center and had so many controls, it was almost impossible to operate without taking my eyes off the road or fumbling around trying to learn some sort of Braille system in order to tune, search, scan, balance and adjust volume.

As lifestyles change, so do one's requirements for a passenger car. Twenty-five years ago, the original T-Bird was just my kind of car. The style and coziness of a 2-seater were most important, gas was cheap and handling was left mainly to the skill of the driver, not to the geometry of the suspension and tractability of the tires. The compact 2-door 1980 Thunderbird still has that cozy feeling, but it also has room for extra passengers and better handling than any T-Bird of the past. My family agreed that this new 'Bird would meet their requirements, not only for everyday driving but also for long-distance travel and week-long trips.



ROAD TEST DATA Ford Thunderbird

SPECIFICATIONS

GENERAL

Vehicle type	Front-engine, rear-drive, 5-pass., 2-door sedan
Base price	\$6432
Options on test car	TR suspension and tire package, A/C, luxury decor group, AM/FM stereo cassette deck, premium sound system, Recaro seats, pwr windows, pwr locks, keyless entry system, 302 V-8, automatic overdrive
Price as tested	\$10,910

ENGINE

Type	V-8, water cooled, cast iron block & heads
Bore & stroke	4.00 x 3.00 in.
Displacement	302 cu. in.
Compression ratio	8.4:1
Fuel system	2-bbl carburetor
Recommended fuel	91 RON, unleaded
Emission control	Federal
Valve gear	Overhead valves
Horsepower (SAE net)	131 at 3600 rpm
Torque (lb.-ft., SAE net)	231 at 1600 rpm
Power-to-weight ratio	24.9 lb./hp

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission	4-speed automatic overdrive
Final drive ratio	2.79:1

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	108.4 in.
Track, F/R	58.4/57.2 in.
Length	200.4 in.

Width	74.1 in.
Height	53.0 in.
Ground clearance	6.0 in.
Curb weight	3270 lb.
Weight distribution, F/R	N.A.

CAPACITIES

Fuel capacity	17.5 gals.
Crankcase	5.0 qts.
Cooling system	14.3 qts.
Trunk capacity	17.7 cu. ft.

SUSPENSION

Front	Hybrid MacPherson struts, hydraulic shocks, stabilizer bar
Rear	4-bar link coil springs, hydraulic shocks, stabilizer bar

STEERING

Type	Rock and pinion, power assist
Turns lock-to-lock	3.4
Turning circle, curb-to-curb	40.1 ft.

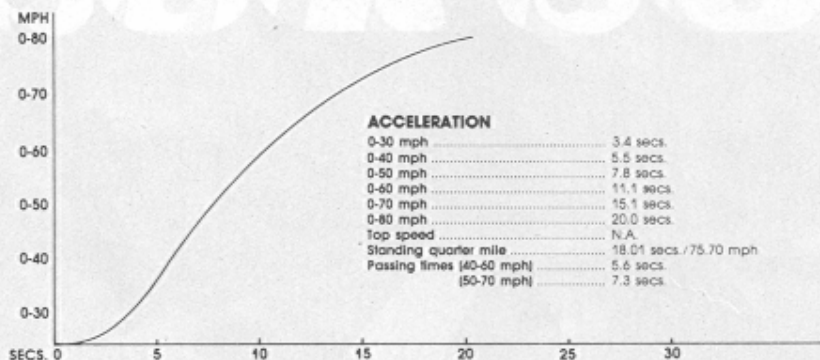
BRAKES

Front	10.0-in. discs, power assist
Rear	9.0-in. drums, power assist

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size	14 x 5.5 in.
Wheel type	Cast aluminum
Tire make and size	Michelin P205/60R390
Tire type	Steel-belted radial
Recommended pressure (psi), F/R	32/32

TEST RESULTS



FUEL CONSUMPTION

EPA City	17.0 mpg
Mf 73-mile test loop	23.1 mpg

SPEEDOMETER

Indicated	30	40	50	60
Actual mph	31	42	52	62

BRAKING

