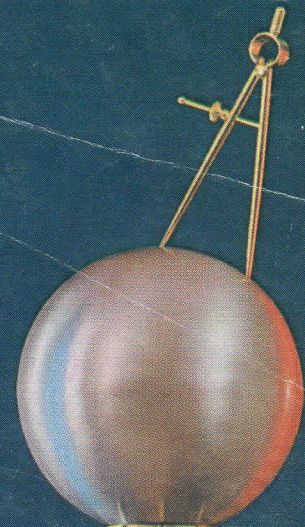


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**SPECIAL  
AWARD  
ISSUE**

FEBRUARY 1964 50¢ (60¢ IN CANADA)  
OVER 500,000 CIRCULATION

## **CAR OF THE YEAR THE 1964 FORDS**



MOTOR TREND AWARD  
TO THE MANUFACTURER OF THE CAR WHICH RECEIVED THE HIGHEST GRADE RATING  
IN THE SURVEY OF CAR OWNERS' OPINIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THE CAR  
1964 FORDS  
FORD MOTOR COMPANY





# 1964 THUNDERBIRD ROAD TEST



by Bob McVay, *Assistant Technical Editor*

**R**OADSIDE BILLBOARDS proclaim, "All you need is a flight plan..." for the 1964 Thunderbird. We agree. The new 1964 T-Bird's cockpit looks a lot like that of an airplane, with its bucket seats and a vast array of dials, levers, switches, and gauges. But that's not the only change in Ford's prestige four-seater. This year it boasts a completely restyled body as well as a restyled interior.

The Thunderbird comes in three body styles: convertible, hardtop and the landau, a hardtop with padded vinyl roof covering and chrome S-bar, plus simulated walnut-grained panels on the dash, door sills, and console. Our test car was a landau. Regular T-Birds come right from the factory fully equipped at their base price. This includes power brakes and steering, Swing-Away steering column, automatic transmission, radio, heater, and back-up lights. Our test car had even more — air conditioning, wire wheels, heavy-duty battery, Cruise Control, power seats, tinted glass, an AM-FM radio, and the "safety convenience control panel."

With its 20.5-gallon tank filled to the brim, our Thunderbird weighed in at a whopping 4740 pounds — and that's a lot of weight to pile on a 113-inch wheelbase. The only

(**OPPOSITE**) MOTOR TREND's technical editors and photographer talk over the 1964 Thunderbird's more salient innovations.

- 1) Fast, hard driving over twisting mountain roads caused extensive front tire wear. Combination of the Thunderbird's great weight, front end geometry, and body lean created quite a bit of tire scuffing when car was taken through fast corners.
- 2) From sea level to 7000-foot altitudes, test Thunderbird gave smooth, quiet performance and a comfortable, stable ride. Cruise-O-Matic's LOW range proved handy for keeping revs up on ascent or holding car's speed down while descending hills.



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ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD LANG  
PHOTOS BY BOB D'OLIVO, PAT BROLLIER

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thing heavier in its class is the T-Bird convertible. With two staff members and our equipment on board, headed for Riverside Raceway, our test car tipped the scales at well over 5100 pounds.

Even with Ford's powerful 300-hp V-8 and a 3.00 rear axle, we didn't expect outstanding performance, and we weren't surprised when it wasn't forthcoming. Our acceleration runs found the T-Bird swooping from zero to 60 mph in 11.2 seconds, passing 30 and 45 at 3.6- and 6.9-second marks. Coming off the line with only a tiny chirp, the T-Bird sailed through our quarter-mile test strip in 18 seconds flat. Our Weston electric speedometer read 76 mph as we crossed the last marker. Diving down out of Turn Eight and into Riverside's long straightaway, the Thunderbird hit an honest 105-mph top speed.

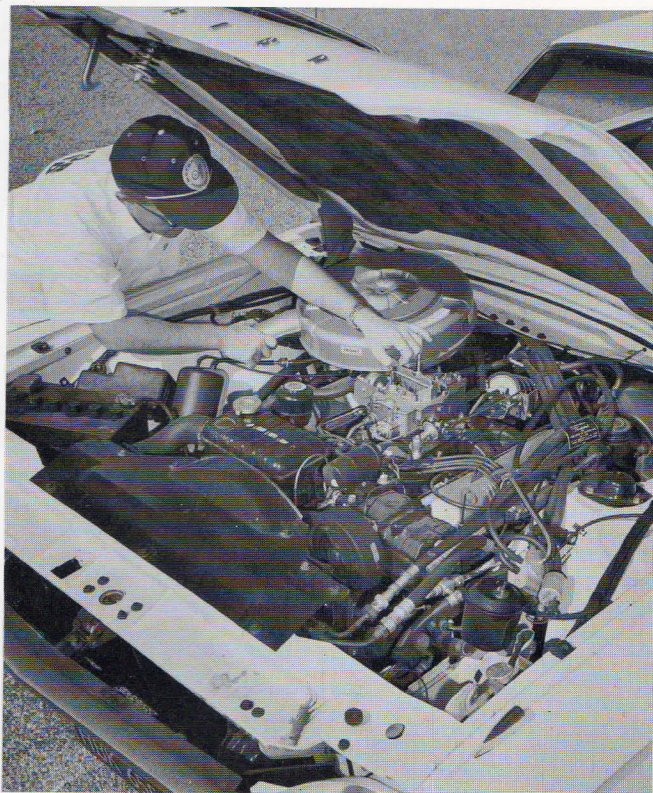
Ford's three-speed automatic transmission is smooth, quiet, and jerk-free. On hard acceleration, it upshifted at 46 and 76 mph, and when pulled into LOW position, it'd downshift at 55 and again at 20 mph. In either of the two DRIVE positions, there wasn't much engine braking, and even with the lever in LOW, it could hold the heavy car down to only 55-60 mph on steep grades. We had no complaints with the transmission. It does its intended job smoothly, quietly, and well.

The Thunderbird isn't a performance car, nor is it a sports car by any stretch of the imagination. What it is a heavy, luxurious, prestige four-seater that gives its owner a soft, smooth ride and every imaginable creature comfort. The T-Bird doesn't lend itself to fast driving any more than it lends itself to hard driving — it just isn't that kind of car.

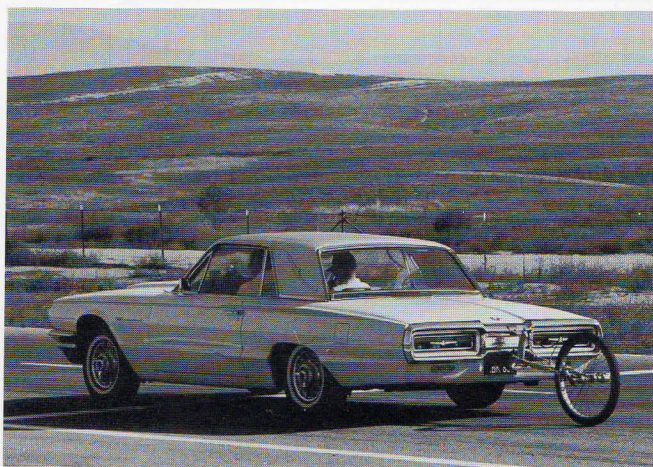
Hard cornering found the car wallowing, showing too much body lean, and scuffing its tires over on their side-walls. At anything above normal speeds, the car's front end would plow sideways in a corner, giving off a tremendous amount of tire squeal and even some white smoke when we pushed it hard through a corner. It's a heavy car, and hard driving, even for short distances, would wear the front tires right down to a nubbin in short order. T-Bird owners, if inclined to drive fast over anything but a straight road, will pay the price in tire wear.

As far as stability goes, the weight shows up to good advantage. Even the hardest of crosswinds didn't bother the T-Bird one whit. Directional stability was good; there was no road wander. Even sharp swerving from one side of the track to the other didn't give us the feeling that we were losing control. The 'Bird bobbed twice on its softer-than-usual-for-Ford front springs and then held on.

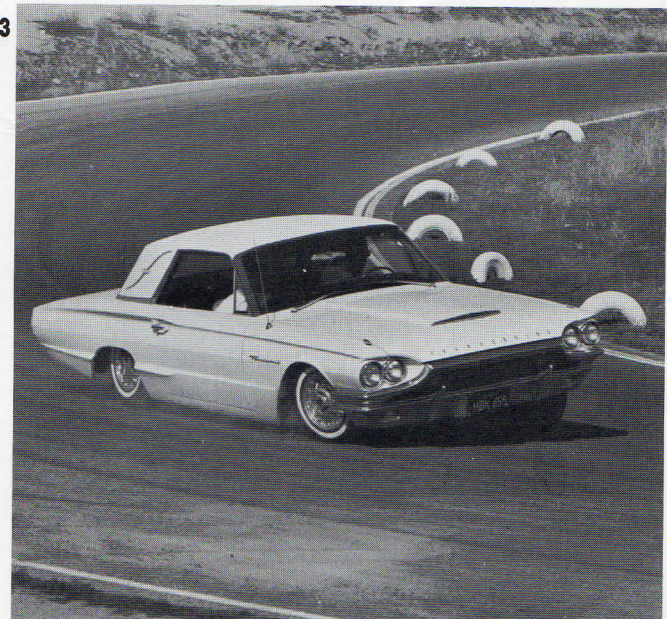
Our test car showed less nose dive on hard stops than Ford sedans, but it did have *some* nose dive. Ford's big 11-inch, ribbed, cast-iron drums do a good job of hauling the ponderous car down to a stop. They have a big job to do, and we weren't surprised to find them fading after a half-



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1) T-Bird's big 300-hp V-8 is quiet, smooth, and gives good economy and performance considering car's weight and purpose.

2) Acceleration is modest, not fierce, with 'Bird coming off line giving only a trace of wheelspin. Car is smooth and quiet all the way up to its top speed of 105 miles per hour.

3) Cornering at Riverside Raceway's Turn Seven found Thunderbird's suspension somewhat softer than other Ford products we tested. It took corners well enough, just a bit more slowly. It was mostly front tire scrub that slowed the car down in turns.





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dozen hard stops or when descending steep hills on winding roads. Normal operation found the brakes strong, sure, and very smooth.

Our panic braking tests brought out another characteristic. On all-out panic stops from 30 mph, the T-Bird shuddered to a halt in just 27.5 feet, a shorter-than-average distance. But, when called upon to stop from an indicated 60 mph, the brakes faded, locking up at about 65 per cent application, and we had our hands full keeping it in a straight line. The car skidded to a halt in 174 feet, a longer-than-average distance. As we said before, the brakes do a big job, and they have a whale of a lot of car to stop.

Economy isn't a T-Bird strong point, but when an owner lays out over \$6000 for a car, fuel economy isn't a prime factor. Our best mileage was 14.5 mpg on a 250-mile drive at a steady 65 mph, while our drive-to-work figures were between nine and 10 mpg. Hard driving took the figure to a low of 8.3, and our average for 750 miles of test driving was 11.1 mpg.

People who buy Thunderbirds won't be too much concerned with such things as performance, economy, or good handling anyway. What they do look for, the Thunderbird offers. It has distinctive styling, exceptional comfort and luxury, and a nice, soft, smooth ride that only a very heavy car can give. The T-Bird's coil-spring front suspension would bottom on harsh dips and rebound sharply at above-average speeds, but the car isn't for above-average speeds on anything but a smooth, straight road. Here it's in its element and would cruise for hours in tomb-like silence. With the windows up, there's only a whisper of wind noise. Even with them down, the T-Bird was far quieter than most hardtops.

This is one of the few cars with a completely adequate fresh-air ventilation system. The T-Bird has a full-length air vent under the back window. This opens and closes by a lever on the control console. The heater's excellent and adequate, as is the air conditioner. Three vents allow fresh or cool air to be directed up, down, or to either side of the passenger compartment. We never had to wait long for the heater to fill the car with warm, fresh air even after a cold morning start.

Our test car's interior was tasteful and comfortable. Seats were cloth covered, but all-vinyl interiors are available. Thunderbird's new thin-shell front bucket seats are excellent. They give good support to legs, back, and shoulders and are adjustable for height, distance from wheel, and even for rake. The rear seats, which are dubbed the "lounge," feature a seat back that curves around toward the back side windows, giving good shoulder support. Back-seat passengers will find leg room a bit scarce, especially if the front seat is anywhere near all the way back. However, leg room is adequate.

The T-Bird's instrument panel is something else. We like airplanes as much as anyone, but regardless of how we feel, many people will like the T-Bird's array of lights, levers, dials, and gauges. Our first impression was one of complete

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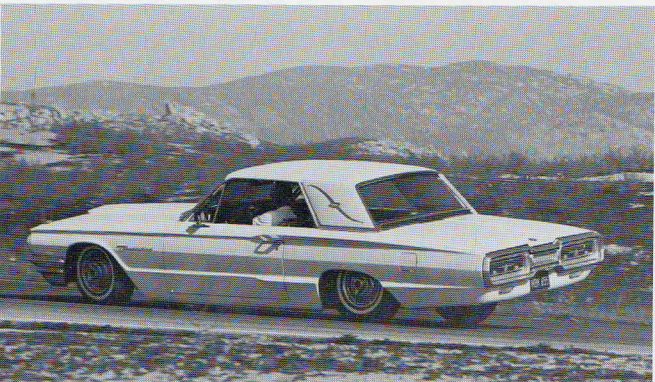
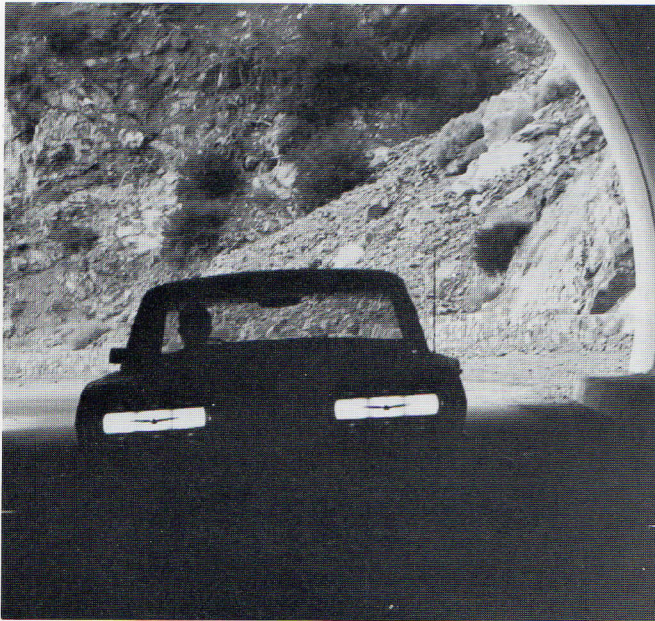
4) Trunk of new T-Bird has more room than former models, due to fuel tank relocation. A high trunk lip makes loading of heavy luggage difficult—spare is a long stretch for shorties.

5) Cockpit is full of dials, levers, and gauges. All are easy to reach and all worked. Our only complaint was the speedometer was difficult to read accurately and was poorly lighted.

6) T-Bird's big cast-iron drum brakes, ribbed for better cooling, do a good job under normal driving conditions; tended to lock up at 65% pressure when we made our panic-brake stops.

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confusion, but like anyone else, we soon got used to it (the dash). It does have legible gauges for oil pressure, temperature, fuel, and battery charge. Warning lights flash *Door Ajar*, *Fasten Seat Belts*, *Low Fuel*, and one even blinks along with all four turn signal lamps (a nice safety feature for roadside repairs at night). Lots of levers, dials, and buttons are also furnished. They all work, and after all, that's what they're supposed to do.

The big 'Bird's Swing-Away steering column made getting in and out an easy maneuver. It wouldn't swing away unless the Cruise-O-Matic lever was in PARK position. We'll have to commend Ford for keeping the shift lever on the steering column, where we could see the quadrant.

We liked the T-Bird's step-on parking brake. Moving the selector lever into any DRIVE position released the brake, another novel and movement-saving feature. Odds and ends will have to fend for themselves in the 'Bird. Where a glove compartment is usually located, there's nothing but a broad expanse of flat surface and a Thunderbird emblem. The center console has a small compartment with room enough for a pair of milady's gloves, an extra pack of cigarettes, and a couple of maps, but little else.

Certain things about the T-Bird were seemingly forgotten. The car had power windows, but the vents were crank operated. It also had a Cruise Control fitted, but couldn't be pre-set by a dial — it had to be set by feel. Once the car was rolling, we had to back off the console-mounted dial until it caught, then roll the dial back until we reached our cruising speed. After that, we had only to steer.

One additional item that should accompany milady when she drives her Thunderbird downtown for a shopping spree is an auto club membership. Should a tire go flat, few women would be able to wrestle the heavy spare wheel and tire out of its high resting place or over the trunk's high lip.

One unusual feature we don't want to forget is the T-Bird's turn signal indicators. Located on the front fender tips, the indicator lights are directly in the driver's line of vision. Even the most inattentive driver will notice when they fail to turn off automatically.

Ever since they switched to a four-passenger design in 1958, Thunderbird sales have soared, along with the car's prestige status. T-Bird buyers are special types, and they like a car that gives them what they want. Former T-Birds have done just that, and this year's model seems to go them one better, with new styling, inside and out, and even more accessories. What little performance image T-Birds once had is gone and forgotten — the 'Bird no longer thunders. Performance, handling, and economy are secondary in importance to a smooth, soft, quiet ride and attention to every little creature comfort.

Ford's Thunderbird fills its intended purpose. It's a real prestige four-seater. Granted, it's not everyone's cup of tea, but for bird-lovers, it's the "only way to fly." Flight plans, anyone?

/MT

1) Dark tunnel silhouettes Thunderbird's tail lights, which are probably the biggest, brightest in the automotive industry.

2) Side view shows car's body lean while cornering at Riverside Raceway. Left front tire gave off wisps of smoke around hard corners, when Thunderbird was pushed to its turn limit.

3) Our test car's interior met with approval of entire test staff. Front buckets are comfortable and fully adjustable. Back seats are comfortable for two, crowded for three people.



## THUNDERBIRD LANDAU

2-door, 4-passenger hardtop

**OPTIONS ON CAR TESTED:** Air conditioning, power seats and windows, AM-FM radio, speed control, safety convenience control panel, heavy-duty battery, wire wheels, whitewalls, tinted glass

**BASIC PRICE:** \$4589

**PRICE AS TESTED:** \$6096 (plus tax and license)

**ODOMETER READING AT START OF TEST:** 1559 miles

**RECOMMENDED ENGINE RED LINE:** 5200 rpm

### PERFORMANCE

#### ACCELERATION (2 aboard)

0-30 mph	3.6 secs.
0-45 mph	6.9
0-60 mph	11.2

Standing start 1/4-mile 1<sup>st</sup> 0 secs. and 76.0 mph

Speeds in gears @ 4300 rpm

1st	46 mph	3rd	105 mph
2nd	76 mph		(@ 4000 rpm)

Speedometer Error on Test Car

Car's speedometer reading	30	46	52	62	72	83
Weston electric speedometer	30	45	50	60	70	80

Observed miles per hour per 1000 rpm in top gear.....26 mph

Stopping Distances—from 30 mph, 27.5 ft.; from 60 mph, 174.0 ft.

## SPECIFICATIONS FROM MANUFACTURER

### Engine

Ohv V-8  
Bore: 4.05 ins.  
Stroke: 3.78 ins.  
Displacement: 390 cu. ins.  
Compression ratio: 10.8:1  
Horsepower: 300 @ 4600 rpm  
Torque: 427 lbs.-ft. @ 2800 rpm  
Horsepower per cubic inch: 0.769  
Carburetion: 1 4-bbl.  
Ignition: 12-volt coil

### Gearbox

3-speed automatic (Cruise-O-Matic);  
column-mounted lever

### Differential

Hypoid, semi-floating  
Standard ratio: 3.00:1

### Suspension

Front: Independent, with coil springs mounted on upper A-arms, single lower control arm, ball joints, tubular shocks, and stabilizer bar  
Rear: Rigid axle, with 4-leaf, semi-elliptic springs, double-acting tubular shocks

### Driveshaft

1-piece, open tube

### Steering

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

### Wheels and Tires

14-inch wire wheels  
8.00 x 14 4-ply whitewall tires

### Brakes

Hydraulic, duo-servo; self-adjusting; cast-iron drums  
Front: 11.09-in. dia. x 3.0 ins. wide cross-ribbed drums  
Rear: 11.09-in. dia. x 2.5 ins. wide flared drums  
Effective lining area: 208 sq. ins.

### Body and Frame

Unitized, with reinforced side rails and crossmembers  
Wheelbase: 113.2 ins.  
Track: front, 61.0 ins.; rear, 60.0 ins.  
Overall length: 205.4 ins.  
Overall width: 77.1 ins.  
Curb weight: 4740 lbs.

(BELOW) STORMING DIRT ROADS FOUND THUNDERBIRD'S WEIGHT WORK TO CAR'S ADVANTAGE, GIVING GOOD TRACTION, EVEN IN FAST BENDS.

