

1963 Thunderbird

After a successful three year run as a two-seat sports car, Thunderbird enthusiasts were stunned when Ford's Motor Company announced that for the 1958 model year, the T-Bird would become a four-passenger vehicle. As a result of that decision Thunderbird sales rose to nearly 39,000 while its competitor, Corvette, languished, selling just over 9,000 units. The "Square Bird", went on to sell nearly 200,000 units during its three year run.

In 1961, Thunderbird jumped on the jet age bandwagon with a completely new look. Ford still had the personal four-seat sports car market all to itself. But by 1962, others manufacturers began to join in, particularly General Motors with Bill Mitchell's beautifully styled Pontiac Grand Prix followed by the magnificent Buick Riviera in 1963.

To combat the competition, Ford set out to keep customers buying T-Birds. Then company vice president and future Ford golden boy, Lee Iacocca announced "The Thunderbird is the most changed car we are offering for 1963", an interesting statement considering that at least visually, few changes could be seen. The grille was revised to look more elegant and the tail lamps had a "jet like" appearance. Fake louver scripts were redesigned and moved from the quarter panels to the doors. Perhaps the most obvious change was a stylish horizontal feature line that ran from the leading edge of the front fender to mid-door before angling downward. While not excessive, the small changes were enough to make it recognizable as a 1963.

So what were the other changes Iacocca was alluding to? Most were unseen and designed to improve quality and ownership experience. To quiet Thunderbird's ride, more than 150 pounds of sound deadener was added throughout. Nearly 80 pounds of reinforcement was added to the structure for increased rigidity and a more solid feel. An alternator replaced the generator for additional charging capacity. Eighteen inch

variable speed windshield wipers were hydraulically powered using pressure from the power steering pump. New windshield moldings reduced wind noise. Exhaust pipes and stainless steel mufflers reduced noise and increased the systems lifespan.

T-Bird buyers had a choice of four models, a two-door hardtop, convertible, Landau and Sports Roadster. Interiors were updated with a passenger side grab bar and door mounted courtesy lamps. An AM radio was now standard equipment as was a driver side remote mirror. Bright trim was added to the gas and brake pedal. The upscale Landau model, first available in 1962, was freshened up with a walnut-grained instrument panel, door pads and matching steering wheel. Mid-year, a limited edition "Principality of Monaco" Landau was released. Available only with a white exterior and interior this limited production model carried a special brass nameplate with the vehicle's serial number. Production was capped at 2,000 units.

Arguably, one of the best looking entries for 1963 was the Sports Roadster. A removable fiberglass tonneau cover completely altered T-bird's appearance by turning the four-seater into a stylish two-seat roadster. The tonneau cover rose above the beltline just behind the front seat back and provided integral headrests for both the driver and passenger. All Sports Roadsters included special front fender emblems and Kelsey Hayes wire wheels.

Powering the Thunderbird was Ford's reliable 390 cubic-inch V8. The base engine was rated at 300 horsepower via a four-barrel carburetor and 9.6:1 compression ratio. While the engine would push a Galaxy along fairly well, the same wasn't true when hauling around a Thunderbird, especially with the added 150 pounds of noise insulation. Those wanting performance to match T-birds styling could opt for the 340 horsepower "M" code version. The extra power was courtesy of an increase in compression to 10.5:1, three two-barrel carburetors and dual exhausts. While the optional engine helped performance to an extent, the 3.00:1 axle ratio limited its true capability.

By the end of the model year, 63,313 Thunderbirds were produced, and of the total, 455 were Sports Roadsters. During its three year design run, the 1961-1963 Thunderbird racked up sales of nearly 215,000 units.