

## 1958-60 Thunderbird Overview

It is often said the best thing that happened to the 55-57 Thunderbird was the 58 Thunderbird. The vast changes made after the 57 were horrifying to enthusiasts and the 58 was often called the “Blunderbird”. Nevertheless, some people liked the 58 Thunderbird, when introduced the hard top listed for \$3,097.00. Later, prices rose too \$3,631.00 and \$3,929.00 for the hard top and convertible respectively. Auto makers then, as now, are somewhat greedy. Production shot up to 37, 892.00 for the 58 model. This represents a 77% increase over the 57 production. Robert MacNamara, the President of Ford Motor Company, met his goal of selling more Thunderbirds.

The 58 Thunderbird was among only two cars showing sales increases over 1957, the other being the Rambler, in the recession plagued year of 1958. This was a great achievement, by the fact the 58 Thunderbird did not start production until January 1958, and the convertible till June 1958, amounting to 6% of Thunderbird production.

Technical highlights included uni-body construction along with the 58 Lincoln. Both low volume cars were manufactured at Ford's new Wixom plant. The 58 Thunderbird was the first car produced with a center console. Both the console and bucket seats were standard. Every 58-60 Thunderbird has stamped holes in the shock towers. The 58 was supposed to have air suspension. Most manufactures offered air ride in 1958, however it was cancelled because of reliability problems. Ford offered a new V8 for 1958, the FE (Ford Edsel) 332 and 352 V8's, a new engine design. The

352 three hundred horsepower V8 was standard from 58-60. The 352 matched the power of the F-code 312 of 1957, but the 58 had over 400lbs more to carry around. Performance from 0-60 was typically around ten seconds, quick for the day. Gas mileage averaged around 15 mpg. The 430 Lincoln engine was mentioned in some sales literature, but never made it past the proto-type stage. Speaking of literature, on introduction of the 58 Ford line the 57 Thunderbird appeared with the 58 lineups. One could buy a new 57 Thunderbird until December 1957. Motor Trend named the 58 T-Bird its Car of the Year.

1959 was a year of refinement, ride qualities were improved with adoption of leaf springs in the rear, replacing the wallowing coil spring rear suspension of 1958. Rear coil springs would not be seen until 1967. The sales disaster of the 58 Lincoln and Edsel translated into surplus MEL (Mercury Edsel Lincoln) 430 engines. This engine was available as an option for all Thunderbirds in 59 and 60. As a young man, a neighbor had a black 60 convertible with this engine. Another guy I knew had a 59 Galaxie with the 352 300-horsepower engine. They used to race in the quarter mile, the Galaxy was always ahead off the line, due to lighter weight. At the 1/8 eighth the Thunderbird always passed the Galaxie and won the quarter. Typical 430 equipped Thunderbirds would do 0-60 mph in 8.5 -9.0 seconds. Gas mileage ranged from 12-16 mpg about the same as the 352. I am looking forward to working on my 64 Lincoln equipped with the 430.

Ford formed an association with Holman and Moody, of Charlotte, N.C. for the construction of several very hot 1959 T-Bird stock cars that made their racing debut at the new 2.5-mile Daytona International Speedway in February 1959. Johnny Beauchamp

was the initial winner in a 59 T-Bird in the inaugural Daytona 500 Race. Two weeks later, they awarded the race to Lee Petty, in a photo finish driving a 59 Oldsmobile. Two of these special Thunderbirds still exist.

The 59 Thunderbird also added a full leather interior to the options list, along with sunray wheel cover inserts, and an engine dress up kit for the 352. A rarely ordered option was the chrome exterior dress up kit, that included: head light bezels, rear taillight surrounds, and wiper bezels. I believe this was available for 1959 and 1960. Convertibles accounted for just over 15% production of the 59 T-Birds. Late in the model year, top operation was fully automatic. Total production jumped 78% to 67,456. This was good news for Ford, despite the sales tragedies of Lincoln and Edsel.

From the beginning until the 70's, Thunderbird styling was on a three-year cycle. 1960 marked the last year of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. Refinements included: improved sound deadener and rust protection, a more refined interior with different upholstery patterns and brushed aluminum applique on door panels and under the dash. Two different upholstery patterns were used on the standard vinyl and leather options.

By now, the Thunderbird had acquired an aura of prestige, unlike the sportier 58 and 59s. Fully equipped Thunderbirds could almost match the base prices of the luxury cars. The list of options included power steering, brakes, seats, windows, air conditioning, and many more creature comforts. A new option, though an old one in Europe, was a sliding sunroof for the hard top. For some reason, these models were called the Golden T-Birds. A real find

would be a sunroof hardtop equipped with the 430, less than 500 were sold.

My dear late father in law was a very successful businessman. At the age of 27, he purchased a new 60 T-Bird in Salmon with the 430. I have a deep sentimental attachment to 60 Thunderbirds. Sadly, today's newer cars are commodities to be used up and thrown away. This is probably why car restoration on cars of yesterday are so popular. The price increases brought the price of a 60 hardtop to \$3,755.00 and convertible to \$4,222.00. Production climbed another 73% to 92,843, a record total which stood until 1977.

Of the three years, the 58 had some reliability concerns with its one year only rear coil spring suspension, originally designed for air suspension. It produced a rolling ride and lean around corners. I own a 58 and can attest to this. Overload shocks with coil springs helps with this ailment. Welded fenders and cowls kept collision costs high. I like the 58 because of the unique fender sights and wheel covers, the 57 T-Bird wheel cover was available as an option as seen in brochures and cars that I have seen. The unique grill which shows the painted core support. This car was also our club President, Roger Noll's, dream car in elementary school. The 59 had a nice grill and better ride than the 58. Most all club members like the triple taillight treatment and sunroof of the 60.

This was a fun time for T-Bird fanciers. The more refined 61-63 Bullet Birds will be our next topic.

During this health crisis and the cancellation of many car shows, it is a good time to spend time with yourself restoring your project

car or updating and doing detailing, maintenance, or restoration as I am doing right now with my 61 T-Bird.

Have a safe and happy summer.

Respectfully Submitted,

Larry

Sneary