

61-63 T-Bird Spotlight

The 61 T-Bird marked the end of the “square-bird” era. The 61 T-Bird was all new. Instead of corners and angles, the car had smooth curving lines. It was longer, lower, wider, and heavier than any other previous addition. Originally, the 61 T-Bird was engineered for front wheel drive, the cost considerations dropped this feature.

Nicknamed the Bullet Bird, Banana Bird, and many others, it had styling traits depicting a rocket with taillights resembling after burners, and sides resembling a rocket. It was styled by Bill Boyer who also styled the one year only 60 Ford. This was a design either you liked or hated. I liked them both especially the lines of a 60 Sunliner Convertible with the top down.

In November 1960, newly elected president John F. Kennedy asked Ford Division General manager, Robert McNamara, to become his secretary of defense. One of McNamara’s last projects at Ford was to authorize production of fifty special 1961 Thunderbird convertibles, all with identical interiors and exteriors, to be used in President Kennedy’s inaugural parade and ball. These cars were reportedly were all especially painted in code Y “Presidential Mahogany”, a Lincoln color not listed in the 61 Ford sales literature. These cars were accented with Code 54, Pearl Beige vinyl interiors. I have never seen one of these in person, it would be quite a find today.

The 61 T-Bird also paced the Indianapolis 500 with A.J. Foyt winning and given the T-Bird Pace Car, which he gave to his mother. A total of 34 were produced with special gold paint.

There was an 8479 designation on their data plate. A member from the Indianapolis Club has a nice example. Many have been discovered painted different colors and restored to original condition.

The 61 t-Bird was sporty and futuristic. It also introduced the swing-away steering wheel, which was optional at extra cost, standard starting in 1962. This was also the last year for wide white-wall tires. This year also marked a new engine for 1961, the famous 390 Ford engine, basically a stroked 352. This engine was produced from 1961 to 1976 and used in many Ford Motor Company cars and trucks. The 430 Lincoln engine available in 59 and 60 T-Birds was no longer available. A well-tuned 390 could hit 60 in around 9 seconds and return gas mileage around 14-15 miles per gallon. These times and figures are about the same as a 58-60 T-Bird despite a higher curb weight of 150 pounds.

The year 1962 brought new models such as the Landau and Sports Roadster. The new Landau featured a black or white vinyl roof and Landau irons on the side of its rear roof panels. This option costs less than \$100.00 and helped increase sales of 7,000 more hardtops than 1961's total hard top sales of 62,535.

The Sports Roadster with a base price of \$5,439.00 included a tonneau cover, wire wheels, grab bar, and unique pieces of trim. It was expensive, but exclusive. Only 1427 were produced in 1962, only 120 had the coveted M- Code option 390. Speaking of the M- Code 390, this was a 390 with three two-barrel carburetors sitting backwards on a special aluminum manifold to clear the sloped hoods of 62-63 T-Birds. It also included a special cam, distributor, 406 heads. It also included a cast aluminum air cleaner and

chrome dress up kit. This option listed at \$376.00 at a cost to the dealer of \$242.00.

Aside from the occasional well-preserved original example surfacing from time to time, not too many M-Code Thunderbirds survived their first decade on the American Road. In order to keep customers happy, Ford replaced many tri-power units with four-barrel carbs under warranty. It seems original owners did not like the rough idle, back-fire and poor fuel economy. Not to mention the constant adjustment, unbecoming of the lifestyle of Thunderbirds market niche. As a result, less than 280 examples were produced for all body styles during 1962-63, making them rare indeed and making an accurate restoration difficult today.

By 1963, the Thunderbird had evolved into a fine road car, with a more refined suspension, 150lbs. more insulation and added personal luxury options. New for 63 was an alternator replacing the generator as was used in previous Thunderbirds. Also, hydraulic wipers were now used, which had no benefit besides higher repair costs. The 63 has a distinct side body line and the prettiest grill of the three years. New options included an AM/FM transistor radio and vacuum power door locks. By the way, the 61 Thunderbird was the first car produced with an all transistor radio.

The Landau returned for 1963 with more luxury, thanks to a rich looking walnut grain dash, door panels, console trim, and a wood grain wheel which was unique to this model. Our club president, Roger Noll, had one of these models with a distinctive dark blue roof. It was a nice car.

Now for some “real class”, in January of 1963, the special addition Landau (only 2,000 made), premiered in the Principality of Monaco. It included the following:

- *special interior of gleaming white interior
- *white vinyl door and trim panels, with rose beige carpet tastefully applied to the lower portion
- *white deluxe steering wheel
- *interior accented by rose beige trim, carpet and kick panels
- *Corinthian white exterior, unique rose-colored vinyl top
- *spinner wheel covers
- *rear fender skirts
- *special plaque on console

All of this was included for just \$200.00 more than the Landau.

Club member, Keith Landez, is lucky to have acquired one of these models. His car has all the special features intact and in good condition. Keith is a busy man and one of these days, he will start restoration of this unique Thunderbird.

The sports roadster had a mere production of 455 with 37 equipped with the M-Code option. When considering purchasing any Sports Roadster, watch for clones, several current and past members have seen many. Always do your research and take a friend when looking or buying any collector car.

Another interesting Ford show car was the “Italien Thunder-Bird”, this was a special show car that was completely restored.

Sales of Thunderbirds were down almost 15,000 from 1962, with sales of 63,313. This was probably because GM offered new competition, the restyled 1963 Pontiac Grand Prix, which had sales of over 72,000 and is rarely seen today, and the Buick Riviera, the first car that is equal in status to the Thunderbird, in my opinion.

Originally, I did not pay much attention to this series of Thunderbird. I like the first two series and the Flare birds. I have had discussions with club members and after examining these cars, I had to have a Bullet Bird. So, I acquired a 61 T-Bird to my collection. I also own a 58 Coupe and a 64 convertible.

I like the 61, because of its unique hood and grill. It also was the last year for wide white walls. My car is also equipped with air, power windows, fender skirts, radio, and the optional for this year, swing away steering wheel. All mechanical, paint, and chrome work is completed. The last phase is the interior replacing the dash, and a new headliner. The seats have been re-upholstered. Club members will see this car in the future. Our next article will have Thunderbirds with a flare.

Happy Motoring!

Respectfully Submitted,

Larry Sneary

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