

# The Ford Thunderbird nicknames

By [Mike Austin](#) on Jul 30th, 2020

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Ford's Thunderbird spans 11 generations and several thematic and mechanical variations. Keeping them straight, though, isn't that hard because the collective Thunderbird enthusiast community has given each one a nickname. Yes, it's part of the general habit we all have of delving into jargon, which acts as a conversational shorthand (which is good) but also makes it harder for newbies to understand what the heck everyone is talking about (which is bad). Thunderbird nicknames, however, are much easier than many other code words, like the endless alphanumeric of BMW and Mercedes-Benz model generations. If, like me, you're relatively uninformed on the full history of Ford's personal-luxury legend, these appellations give context clues as to what each one generally looks like and what era it hails from. And with that easy entry point, you can then dive deeper into the details. So let's take a quick tour of all 11 Thunderbird names and how they got that way.

## Classic Bird (aka Early Bird, Little Bird, Baby Bird): 1955-'57



Why: It's the original recipe. "Classic" and "Early" are kind of self-explanatory, while "Little" and "Baby" refer to the fact that it's the only two-seater in the family tree until the 2002 model. Need to know: A serendipitous convergence of what Ford executives and stylists were already thinking on plus a response to the 1953 Chevrolet Corvette, the first Thunderbird used plenty of off-the-shelf parts to keep costs down. Buyer's didn't seem to care, as the [first-generation T-Bird](#) vastly outsold the early 'Vette.

Price range: Starting around the \$20,000 bracket, with a sweet spot just under \$50,000 according to [the current listings in the Hemmings Classifieds](#). Fresh restorations, restomods, and rare option combinations inflate the asking price of some examples to just under six figures.

## The Square Bird: 1958-'60



Why: It's boxy but good.

Need to know: Room for five made the 'Bird bigger and less sporty but also a whole lot more appealing to the general public. Sales of the second generation exploded to around four times the total of the first generation, and increased every year. One 1960 model was also made out of stainless steel by Allegheny Ludlum.

Price range: Under \$20,000 up to \$60,000, according to our classifieds.





## The Bullet Bird: 1961-'63



Why: It's sleek and streamlined like a projectile.

Need to know: Quoting our own Thunderbird expert, Richard Lentinello, [\*in Hemmings Classic Car\*](#) "The new 1961 models were within an inch the same size as the squarebirds, but they looked lower, longer and wider, with an exciting-looking body featuring all sorts of jet aircraft styling cues. They simply looked fast even when they were standing still." Also, the landau roof was first available in 1962.

Price range: [Plenty of options under \\$25,000](#), with nicer examples and those with rare engines and options listed for \$60,000 and, in some cases, above.



## The Flair Bird: 1964-'66



Why: A more formal, upright design, but with plenty of chrome it was still styling and profiling.  
Need to know: The new sheet metal kept the Thunderbird at the top of the sales chart in the personal luxury segment, and ended up being the last convertible until the 2002 reboot. Disc brakes were added in 1965, and a new egg-crate grille closed out the model run in 1966.  
Price range: Slightly more of a value play than the Bullet Bird on the low end, [you can find options](#) in the low teens while fresh restorations come with asking prices around \$50,000.





## The Glamour Bird: 1967-'71



Why: While predating the glam-rock era by a few years, this Thunderbird dropped the sporty façade and went fully into large luxury -boat territory.

Need to know: The [aviation-themed dashboard](#) from this generation is pretty cool. There was also a model with rear-hinged rear doors. In 1970, the flush hidden-headlamp grille gave way to a pointed snout. Not loved nearly as much as other Thunderbirds, this generation has a lower survival rate, [making them rarer today](#).

Price range: That rarity is reflected in the [few for sale in the Hemmings Classifieds](#) as of this writing, with prices from \$10,000-\$20,000 that are in line with recent auction results.



## The Big Bird: 1972-'76



Why: It's the biggest and heaviest Thunderbird, but does not, as far we can tell, live on Sesame Street.

Need to know: It's more than 18 feet long, over 2 feet longer than a current Ford Explorer.

The [Big Bird](#) shared its body and underpinnings with the Continental Mark IV. Restyled just a year after its debut, in part to meet the new bumper standards, by 1975 the emissions-hobbled T-Bird was [still cushy, but, down to 218 hp, also incredibly slow](#).

Price range: Another rare bird [in the Hemmings Classifieds](#), \$10,000 and below seems to be the going rate for most examples.





## The Torino Bird: 1977-'79



Why: No longer a sibling to the Continental, this Thunderbird was based on the Ford Torino. Need to know: Shorter in wheelbase but not appreciably smaller than its predecessor, the [move to a midsize platform](#) (and a price cut) resulted in record sales. Ford moved more than 300,000 copies in the first two model years, and nearly that many for the third.

Price range: You can get all the Torino Bird you want for \$15,000 or less, although [you don't see many for sale](#).



## The Box Bird: 1980-'82



Why: because it was Square and slabby, like a hexahedron.

Need to know: It's the first Thunderbird on the [Fox platform](#), and the downsizing to an intermediate form meant room for four instead of the previous six. Sales dropped nearly in half in 1980, dwindling to just over 45,000 in 1982.

Price range: This and the previous generation are the nadir of the Thunderbird line, with [availability and pricing](#) that reflect a lack of collector interest. As before, they seem to go for under \$15,000.





## The Aero Bird 1983-88



Why: An aerodynamic shape that caused a stir in the showroom and put Ford back into relevance on the NASCAR track.

Need to know: The top of the line model was not the Windsor V-8 but the Turbo Coupe, with its turbocharged 2.3-liter four-cylinder. In 1987 the [aero look went a step further](#) with flush headlamps and an output increase to 190 hp to match the style. Sales rebounded in this generation, averaging nearly 150,000 a year across the total run.

1985 (pictured) was the 30th anniversary of the Thunderbird.

Price range: [When you can find one](#), they seem to go for \$10,000 or more. Given the increasing popularity of cars from the 1980s, we'd expect to see more examples and climbing prices in the future.



## The Super Bird: 1989-'97



Why: Adapted from the supercharged Thunderbird Super Coupe (or SC) model available in this generation.

Need to know: Evolving the aerodynamic look of the Aero Bird, the Super Bird was a legit grand touring machine in SC trim, with a loads of torque from the supercharged 3.8-liter V-6 and other goodies like electronic-adjustable shocks. That engine was highly tunable as well. The Windsor V-8 came in 1991, followed up with the modular V-8, although both were only available with an automatic transmission.

Price range: Generally under \$15,000, although in short supply in both the [Hemmings Classifieds](#) as well as the [Super Coupe Club of America forum](#).





## The Retro Bird 2002 -2005



Why: Ford was getting in on the retro trend when it brought the T-Bird back on a platform shared with the Lincoln LS and Jaguar S-Type.

Need to know: After a strong first year, sales declined every year. There's plenty of blame to go around--a two-year wait from the concept to production and a sedate driving experience are two popular reasons. Or, maybe it was that, like the 1955 model that inspired the design, the two-seat layout had limited appeal to buyers. Today, however, the Retro Bird is gaining a following as a modern, comfortable cruiser. The 05' was the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Thunderbird.

Price range: Many of these were taken care of since new, so there's ample supply of good examples. [Asking prices in the Hemmings Classifieds](#) go from about \$10,000 on the low end to \$40,000 for an ultra-low mileage car, with plenty of choices around \$20,000.

