

PROFESSIONAL PILOT



JUNE 2025



CONAIR
AERIAL FIREFIGHTING

Conair is recognized for innovation, safety, and operational excellence in aerial firefighting worldwide. At YXX (Intl, Abbotsford BC, Canada) are (L-R) Birddog Fleet Mgr Ryan Gahan, Dir Business Devt Michael Benson, COO Tristan Serretta, and Aircraft Maintenance Engineer Tom Huxley with a TBM 960 and a fleet of de Havilland Dash 8-400AT.

Conair: Aerial firefighting's gold standard continues to evolve

With a fleet of 70 aircraft, unique and rewarding opportunities abound for its 150 pilots.

Photo courtesy Conair

By Justin Marchand
Contributing Writer

Innovate and advance together. That is what Abbotsford BC, Canada's Conair has done with its global partners for more than 5 decades. Governments that need aerial firefighting turn to Conair – the critical airborne mission specialist.

As an industry leader in providing air tankers, crew, and maintenance on contract over fire seasons, Conair operates a fleet of 70 aircraft and flies more than 12,000 flight hours annually around the globe. As both an OEM and operator, it has also pioneered several different aircraft types and technologies to serve the aerial firefighting and special mission market.

Aerial firefighting pioneer

The first of the Conair companies was formed in 1969 by Barry Marsden as a spin-off of Skyway Air Services located in Langley BC, Canada. It provided aerial firefighting and application work within the province using 19 aircraft with a staff of 35. Today, Conair's team of more than 500 skilled employees maintain and operate the largest privately-owned fixed-wing fleet of aerial firefighting aircraft in the world.

"For more than 56 years, our team has worked together with our government agency partners and fellow emergency responders, with the same goal – to protect our world from wildfires," notes Chief Operating Officer Tristan Serretta. "Over the past 5 decades Conair has created 16 different aircraft types and modified more than 180 individual planes into firefighters."

Serretta is a former French Air Force navigator with more than 5000 hours TT and solid operational experience. He transitioned through various management roles at Airbus Helicopters before leading SAF Aerogroup as CEO. He has now joined Conair, where he is focussed on continuing to develop a resilient, high-performing organization, dedicated to operational excellence and continuous improvement.

Conair remanufactures and operates the Dash 8-400AT/MRE, the most modern air tanker in the world. And it recently added the Daher TBM 960 to its bird dog lead plane fleet. Each of the company's aircraft is designed to conduct aerial attacks against forest fires under extreme conditions.

Diverse global fleet

Conair is always investigating new aircraft, innovative technologies, and advanced materials that have the potential to improve response to wildfires. Most recently, it acquired 2 Daher TBM 960 turboprops to be used as bird dog lead planes. These aircraft fly low and on a continuous basis during wildfire air attack missions.

The remainder of the fleet consists of Air Tractor AT-802, Avro RJ85, and de Havilland Dash 8-400AT land-based air tankers, Air Tractor AT-802 Fire Boss and de Havilland CL-415 water scoopers, and Rockwell Turbo Commander 690 and Cessna 208B Caravan bird dog aircraft.

Conair currently contracts aircraft and operations to New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria in Australia, British Columbia, Alberta, and the Yukon in Canada, and Alaska plus additional US states through its Spokane WA subsidiary Aero-Flite.



COO Tristan Serretta, a former French Air Force navigator with more than 5000 hrs TT, joined Conair in 2025. He leads Conair's team of more than 500 skilled employees who maintain and operate the largest privately-owned, fixed-wing fleet of aerial firefighting aircraft in the world.



Dir of Business Development Michael Benson joined Conair with 30 years' wildfire experience. He is a former air tanker program lead for British Columbia Wildfire Service.

Conair also sells air tankers to government agencies that own and operate their own fleets. It currently produces the Dash 8-400AT, capable of delivering 10,000 liters (2640 gallons) of retardant in one drop out of bases with 5000-ft runways. It is also the OEM for the Dash 8-400MRE Multi Role. As agencies change from a wildfire-only approach to an all-hazard approach, the Dash 8-400MRE is designed with the speed, capacity and performance required for a multitude of crisis situations. The multirole aircraft is capable of quick configuration changes between airtanker, medevac, cargo, and passenger combined missions.

In all, 22 of these Dash 8-400AT/MRE aircraft are operational worldwide, and Conair continues to produce 4 units a year. Sécurité Civile – the French government's civil protection agency – owns and operates 8 Dash 8-400MRE for firefighting and other crisis response operations, including medevac, cargo transport, and natural disaster response. Most recently, the Canadian province of Saskatchewan ordered 2 Dash 8-400AT and 2 Dash 8-400MRE aircraft, which are expected to enter service between 2025 and 2028.

Bird dog of the future

Conair has recently modernized its air attack fleet by introducing the Daher TBM 960. The first TBM 960 was delivered in Oct 2024, and the second example in Jan 2025. The aircraft were retrofitted for use in aerial

firefighting operations and received full Transport Canada certification in May 2025.

"The TBM is the bird dog of the future that could be around for the next 30 to 40 years," says Conair Director of Business Development Michael Benson. "Overall, it is a huge leap forward. With its advanced safety features and technological advancement, it offers air attack officers the perfect platform from which to observe wildfires and strategize tactics for the best aerial response. It's just a whole new world – fast, with modern avionics and upgraded safety systems."

Benson joined Conair after a 30-year career in wildfire, most recently leading the wildfire operations research program at FPIInnovations – a not-for-profit research and development organization based in Canada.

Prior to FPIInnovations, he led the air tanker program for British Columbia Wildfire Service, responding to wildfires spread over nearly 1 million sq km with both amphibious water bombers and retardant air tankers.

On board bird dog aircraft is a pilot plus a government agency air attack officer who manages the aerial response by scouting the fire area, observing fire behavior and changes in the weather, identifying critical assets at threat, and developing tactics to protect those assets.

"Historically, in this sector, the Turbo Commander 690 was the standard," Benson adds. "We have been using it for 30-plus years. Conair introduced it to the aerial firefighting community but, as we continue to grow, we wanted to make sure that we weren't going out and buying more 55-year-old technology."



Conair chose the Daher TBM 960 as its next-generation bird dog aircraft based on its superior performance, modern design standards, advanced features, improved reliability, and strong OEM support.



Dir of Business Development Michael Benson (L) and Aircraft Maintenance Engineer Tom Huxley – a 28-year company veteran. Conair performs repair, maintenance, and overhaul on its entire fleet inhouse with a maintenance staff of 75.



Before joining Conair, Bird Dog Fleet Mgr Ryan Gahan spent many years as a flight instructor teaching private and commercial students, and worked in the airline industry flying Beech 1900s and Saab 340s. In 2013, he started his career with Conair as a Convair 580 first officer. In 2016, he moved to the air attack department as a bird dog pilot flying the Cessna Caravan, Aerostar, and Twin Commander.

The TBM 960 was selected after a rigorous evaluation of more than 50 aircraft, and was finally chosen for safety and operational fit. The aircraft features a single-lever digital engine and propeller control, an advanced Doppler radar system that detects lightning and turbulence, electronic stability and under-speed protection, and emergency descent mode.

“Probably the greatest single feature on the TBM 960 is the single-lever operation,” comments Benson. “Our missions are at 150 ft. This

feature allows our pilots to have their eyes on terrain and on other airplanes rather than looking to synchronize gauges.”

The TBM’s single-lever system controls both engine power and propeller speed, streamlining operations and providing full digital envelope protection. It operates in conjunction with an engine and propeller electronic control system (EPECS), which manages engine and propeller functions automatically.

Benson also cites other enhanced

safety features, such as the Home-Safe emergency autoland system, which takes control of the aircraft’s flight controls and power settings in the event of pilot incapacitation, bringing the aircraft to a runway touchdown if initiated by someone on board or when emergency descent mode is engaged.

The TBM 960s were retrofitted by Conair with specialized avionics and equipment specific to wildfire operations. Modifications include Max-Viz dual sensor enhanced flight vision systems (EFVS), integration of FM radios, a third AM radio, temperature and humidity sensors, an onboard smoke generation system, and other direct integrations into the TBM’s Garmin G3000 flight deck.

Flying for Conair

Conair has invested more than \$20 million into its simulator systems to prepare its flight crews to be safe and successful within unique and challenging mission profiles. This investment includes a full-motion Level D RJ85 simulator, Level 5 AT-802 flight training device (FTD), and its specialized simulator platform – the Mission Training System (MTS), which incorporates 6 integrated FTDs, each certified to Level 4 by Transport Canada, with pilots operating together in a synthetic wildfire environment to practice firefighting techniques.



The Dash 8-400 air tanker is a versatile aircraft designed for aerial firefighting and other emergency response missions. The air-tanker-only variant can tackle wildfires with a 10,000-liter (2640-gal) retardant payload, while the multirole version is designed to be reconfigured for different roles, including air tanker, cargo, passenger, and medevac. Photo by firefighter J Van Der Leek.



Conair's 70-strong fleet, consisting of air attack and both land-based and amphibious air tankers, is headquartered at YXX (Abbotsford BC, Canada).

"Each year, all our pilots undergo intensive training. Even those with decades of firefighting experience are still required to complete training that refreshes their skills and puts them back into their peak performance level prior to deployment," explains Conair Bird Dog Fleet Manager Ryan Gahan. "Our crews take ground school, type training, plus aerial firefighter simulator and on-wing training. Our pilots are specialized, typically focusing on one type within our fleet. Some of our more experienced pilots – those who have been with us for decades – have experience flying multiple types."

Prior to joining Conair, Gahan spent many years as a flight instructor teaching private and commercial students, as well as in the airline industry flying Beech 1900s and Saab 340s. He joined Conair in 2013 as a Convair CV-580 first officer and moved to the air attack department in 2016 as a bird dog pilot flying the Cessna Caravan, Aerostar, and Twin Commander aircraft.

"Our bird dog pilots all participate in exercises within our MTS. They can practice over the same fire at the same time, hearing and seeing each other," says Gahan. "These are the only specialized aerial firefighting simulators in the world of their kind. The sim fire reacts to fuel type, environment conditions, water, and retardant drops the same way an actual wildland fire would react. The system is an integral part of our pilot training program."

"They're all highly realistic cock-

pits, identical to what you would find in the actual airplanes," adds Benson. "As a result, we're training people better and faster while burning less fuel and lowering risk exposure."

Daher TBM 960 pilots complete type training through SIMCOM in Orlando FL before returning to Abbotsford to complete the remainder of their training.

When looking for pilots, Conair requires 2000 hours, with a minimum of 1000 hours as pilot-in-command and at least 250 hours of flying in mountainous terrain. "Flying for Conair offers pilots an amazing career opportunity," says Benson. "If you are not satisfied flying from point A to point B, this can be an amazing career with a really great sense of accomplishment. You're engaging in an industry with social and environmental value, and you're part of a really high performing team."

Extensive maintenance capability

All MRO work on Conair's fleet is performed by the company's inhouse aviation maintenance experts. The operator is a Transport Canada-approved maintenance organization, with a comprehensive maintenance plan in place for all its aircraft. "We perform maintenance inhouse to the most stringent standards in the world, typically performing all heavy maintenance during the off-season so that the firefighting aircraft are ready to respond throughout the fire season," explains Aircraft Maintenance Engineer Tom Huxley.

"Conair is full-service," he continues. "Our maintenance department includes more than 75 skilled team members, specialists in aircraft maintenance, avionics, and structures. Plus we have component overhaul specialists, material planners, quality assurance professionals, purchasers, paint specialists, non-destructive testing specialists, and shipping staff. And we are a Design Approval Organization, with an onsite team of aerospace engineers."

Modernized for the future

The culture at Conair is built on teamwork, with a commitment to safety, people, and service. And it continues to take bold steps as a leader in innovation and reliability. By acquiring brand-new modern aircraft, building the most advanced tactical air attack platform in the world, and manufacturing the most capable air tanker platform, the company offers global agencies a wealth of support as they address the complex challenge of responding to escalating wildfire behavior. And it offers pilots an equally amazing opportunity to fly missions with purpose.

"Within the next 5 or so years, we will move toward retiring our current bird dog fleet of Commander 690s, likely replacing the platform with the Daher TBM 960, ensuring our aircraft are always ready to respond when needed, and not grounded for obsolescence or costly and time-consuming repairs," declares Serretta. "Currently, our bird dog fleet operates in British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alberta, but we could see this market expand, introducing TBM bird dog capabilities to new customer agencies. We will also see our Dash 8-400 air tanker operations expand worldwide. More than 22 of the type are responding to fires today, and that number could double in the next decade."



Justin Marchand is an aviation journalist who has specialized in writing about technology, corporate flight departments, and pioneering helicopter operators for the past 25 years.

The logo for Daher, featuring a stylized red and white icon to the left of the word "DAHER" in white capital letters.

DAHER



TBM *960* **DIGITAL POWER**

Our latest TBM very fast turboprop aircraft delivers the full benefits of digital power. Taking maximum advantage of today's turboprop technology, the single-engine TBM 960 provides high efficiency for more sustainability. In its Prestige cabin, passengers regulate temperature and ambient lighting with exactitude. Featuring outstanding safety systems such as the TBM e-copilot® and HomeSafe™ emergency autoland, the TBM 960 is the quintessential TBM.

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