Captain Alvaro & the Guardavidas: Book Club Guide for Schools

Nov 8, 2026 · @Amy Falk Weinberger

A teacher's guide for reading Captain Alvaro & the Guardavidas with students: discussion questions, water-safety lessons and hands-on activities built around the real lifeguards of Costa Ballena. It is recommended to collaborate with the music, math, science, social studies, and art departments when possible.

About the book

Captain Alvaro & the Guardavidas follows 10 lifeguards, each with a spirit animal, and one scarlet macaw who has been watching over Costa Ballena for 30 years.

Author	Amy Falk Weinberger
Illustrator	Brooklyn Edsall
Setting	Costa Ballena, Costa Rica: Dominical, Playa Hermosa, Uvita and nearby beaches
Inspired by	The real Guardavidas who staff the lifeguard towers at Playa Dominical and Playa Hermosa
Recommended for	10+ years old

The characters are based on real lifeguards your students may see on the beach. That makes the book a natural starting point for talking about ocean safety, community and courage.

Learning objectives

By the end of the book club, students will be able to:

1. Identify a rip current and explain how to escape one.
2. Describe a lifeguard's job, including the difference between prevention and rescue.
3. Use evidence from the text to explain how each lifeguard's traits connect to their spirit animal.

4. Connect the story's setting to Costa Rica's geography, wildlife and cultures.
5. Give examples of the four values in the dedication: Discipline, Courage, Respect and Service.
6. Consider the career of a lifeguard - pros/cons
7. Connect with local lifeguards in our own communities.

Content notes for teachers

The rescues are realistic. Preview these scenes and decide whether to read them aloud, prepare students first, or assign them for independent reading.

Chapter	What happens
About Scarlet	Poachers take Scarlet's siblings and parents; drownings are mentioned
Day 2	A father blacks out after being pulled under a wave; his young son is rescued
Day 3	A car crash; one driver has no pulse and is revived with a defibrillator, with broken ribs and a broken pelvis
Day 4	A hiker has a deep, bleeding cut and needs a tourniquet; the two tourists are visiting from Israel to get away from a war
Day 5	A needlefish beak lodges in a surfer's neck; he receives CPR and later has surgery
Day 6	A beginner surfer has a possible spinal injury
Day 7	A dog caught in the undertow, a stingray injury, heat exhaustion and a concussion

In every scene the lifeguards stay calm, work as a team and talk through their feelings afterward. That makes these scenes a good starting point for talking about staying calm and asking for help.

Reading schedule

Ten sessions of about 45 minutes, one chapter at a time. Combine or split sessions to fit your class.

Session	Read	Focus
1	A Note From the Real Captain Alvaro, the dedication, Both, About Scarlet	Before reading activities, map of Costa Ballena
2	Meet Captain Alvaro; browse Part Three, The Lifeguards	Meet the crew, trading cards
3	Day 1: The Arrival & Rip Currents	Spotting and escaping a rip current
4	Day 2: The Pura Vida Patrol	Teamwork and roles
5	Day 3: The Car Crash	Community and staying calm
6	Day 4: Waterfalls & Rocks	Weather warnings, asking for help
7	Day 5: Nature Calls	Ocean wildlife and plastic
8	Day 6: One Team	What to do if lost at the beach
9	Day 7: The Ceremony and Beyond the Rip	Values, spirit animals, celebration
10	Part Five: Fun Facts	Find the Match, Could You Be a Guardavida?, safety infographics, glossary, a gratitude letter

Before reading

Spend one session setting the scene so students recognize the places and the job before they meet the characters.

1. **Use the map of Costa Ballena from Part 1.** Locate Dominical, Playa Hermosa and Uvita on Costa Rica's southern Pacific coast. Point out the Whale's Tail at Playa Uvita. Use Google Maps to understand the full context of where Costa Ballena is in relation to where you are living.
2. **"Costa Ballena has some of the most powerful waves in Costa Rica." - What makes this true?**

3. **Ask what students already know.** Who has seen a lifeguard tower? What is a rip current? What do the guardavidas (lifeguards) do all day? Why do some beaches need them more than others?
4. **Look at the cover together.** What do students predict about the interaction of the macaw, the lifeguards and the pup?

Key vocabulary

Word	Meaning
Guardavida (lifeguard)	A trained rescuer who watches swimmers and keeps a beach safe
Rip current	A strong, narrow channel of water flowing away from shore
Tide	The daily rise and fall of the sea level
Rescue	Helping someone out of danger
Spirit animal	An animal whose qualities reflect a person's character
Larimar	A blue stone from the Caribbean, linked to water in the story
Scarlet macaw	A large red, yellow and blue parrot native to Costa Rica (lapa roja)

Meet the crew

Each lifeguard in the book has a trading card with a spirit animal and fun facts; hand the cards out as students meet each character.

Lifeguard	Nickname	Spirit animal	Fun facts
Captain Alvaro	Captain	Eagle ray	Rescue specialist and surfer
Paloma Gonzalez	Ozzy	Blue morpho butterfly	Kickboxing and jiu-jitsu; surfs in Pavones; volunteers at summer camp

Lifeguard	Nickname	Spirit animal	Fun facts
Ronny Miquel Mesen	Jesús	Basilisk lizard	Boxer and photographer; plays the flute; loves gallo pinto
Andrea Vanessa Morales	Vani	Scarlet macaw	Social organizer; does magic tricks on her breaks; surfs goofy-foot
Yeiner Andreó Araya	Mr. Sunshine	River otter	Makes his own tortillas and built a pizza oven to make fresh pizza
Mariela Olyvia Rivera	Mar	Mariela bee	Storyteller, weaves palm tree leaves into baskets & animals, hums when she works
Mateo Austin Tubito	Nacho	Sea turtle	Listens to 6 audiobooks/month
Roy Haley Sanchez	Tower	Dolphin	Makes homemade ice cream for the shops in Uvita, Costa Rica
Lt. Abraham Jossué Padilla	Muscles	Jaguar	Loves to sing and dance and can name every Costa Rican snake

Talk about it: How might the author have chosen each spirit animal? For example, why do you think the author matched the Basilisk Lizard with the Ronny's character?

Highlights

- [ ] **A Note from Captain Alvaro** (Spanish & English) - have you written a gratitude letter before? If yes, to whom? If no, to whom would you write one? When we finish reading this novel, perhaps you will consider writing a gratitude letter to the author and to the illustrator. (amyweinberger18@gmail.com) (hello@bwork.studio)
- [ ] **Dedication page** - discuss the four words that the author chose. How do they relate to lifeguards? To life in general?
- [ ] **There are 7 sections:** Part One - Meet the Book, Part Two - Lifeguard Academy: The Second Week, Part Three - The Lifeguards, Part Four - The Spirit Animals, Part Five - Fun Facts, Part Six - Meet the Creative Team, Part Seven - Gratitudes
- [ ] **The Illustrations:** Before reading any of the stories, find the illustrations for discussion. (Each of them were drawn by hand and then developed on the iPad.) For those artists in the classrooms, what illustrations would you add to the chapters? You can submit your artwork to the emails above. It is possible for the second printing that some might be included. We would inform the artist!!

- [ ] **Fun Facts:**
  - [ ] Scarlet and Captain Alvaro's Timeline - Create a personal timeline of milestones.
  - [ ] Could you Be a Guardavida? Which boxes could you check off for yourself now?
  - [ ] Find the Match - Using the clues in the chapters, match the spirit animals to the lifeguards.
  - [ ] Safety Infographics - Review each of the pages (pages 223-231) - What do you already know? - What is new information to you?
  - [ ] - Are there signs you have seen that you would add to these descriptions?
- [ ] The Language of Costa Rica: A Glossary - There are four parts.
  - [ ] The Land, Sea, and Safety
  - [ ] The People and Community
  - [ ] The Spirit World
  - [ ] Surf Language - What words would you add to the glossary? - Which words are already familiar and which words are new for you?
- [ ] Meet the Author and Meet the Illustrator. (Email us for real time conversations via Zoom, Google, WhatsApp or in person depending on location.)
- [ ] The Guardavida Roster and Board of Directors - Find our names on Social Media and interact with our stories!

Chapter-by-chapter questions

Each set climbs Bloom's taxonomy, from Remember to Create, with the level labeled at the start of each question. Younger readers can stay with the first three levels; older readers can push to the top.

How to use the Remember questions. The first question in every set is the only one with a single right answer: facts students can find on the page (who, what, where, when). Use it before discussion to check that everyone has the basic facts, since students can't explain, compare or judge a scene they don't remember accurately. Each Remember question also sets up the higher levels in its set; for example, recalling the five bracelet stones on Day 1 prepares students to design their own bracelet.

- **Ways to use them:** a 2-minute warm-up, think-pair-share, a written check or exit ticket, or an open-book scavenger hunt where students find the page that proves the answer.

- **Support:** they give younger readers and English learners a place to succeed before stretching to harder levels.
- **Open-book recommended:** Day 2 (who handled each danger) and Day 4 (the rescue gear) ask for many details. Let students use the book, or accept two or three correct facts.
- **Answers:** all Remember answers are in the Answer key at the end of this guide.

Part One: Both, About Scarlet and Meet Captain Alvaro

1. **Remember:** Where and when was Scarlet born, and what were her three survival rules?
2. **Understand:** Why did Scarlet and her mate leave Jacó and fly south?
3. **Apply:** Most humans glanced up at Scarlet's warnings and looked away. If you saw someone in danger at the beach, how would you make sure people paid attention?
4. **Analyze:** Compare how most humans reacted to Scarlet's screeches with how Alvaro reacted the day he saved Gretel. What made the difference?
5. **Evaluate:** Scarlet did not want her babies born in an artificial nest, yet the nest project helped scarlet macaws survive. Was the project a good idea? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Write three survival rules for the beach in Scarlet's style, and explain why each one matters.

Day 1: The Arrival & Rip Currents

1. **Remember:** What are the five stones in the bracelet, and what does each one stand for?
2. **Understand:** Why doesn't swimming straight back to shore get you out of a rip current?
3. **Apply:** You see a calm, dark gap between the breaking waves where people are swimming. Using Mariela's advice, "Know before you go," what do you do?
4. **Analyze:** In 2024 the team made 3,867 preventions and 20 rescues. What does that comparison tell you about a lifeguard's real job?
5. **Evaluate:** Paloma says, "I hope I can feel brave when it's my turn." Can a person be scared and brave at the same time? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Design a poster that teaches tourists what to do if a rip current pulls them out.

Be the editor: Even published books can have mistakes. There is a typing error hidden in this chapter, near the end, when Paloma paddles out to Yeiner. Can you find it? How should it be written? (Answer: page 36, "paddled up tohimr" should be "paddled up to him.")

Day 2: The Pura Vida Patrol

1. **Remember:** What were the three dangers on Day 2, and which lifeguards handled each one?
2. **Understand:** What does Captain Alvaro mean when he says the ocean tested them "not to break us"?
3. **Apply:** Use the team's review questions on something you did this week: What worked? What would you change? What will you carry forward?
4. **Analyze:** Mariela moved the crowd back while others swam out. Why was her job just as important as the rescues?
5. **Evaluate:** Andrea thanks the scarlets for their early warning. Who gives warnings in your life that people ignore? Should they listen more? Explain.
6. **Create:** Draw a map of the beach showing where each lifeguard was during the three rescues.

Day 3: The Car Crash

1. **Remember:** Who was in each car, and which lifeguards helped each driver?
2. **Understand:** Why did Captain Alvaro tell Sofia his name, ask hers and explain each step?
3. **Apply:** Like the road worker, you witness an accident. How could you help safely without getting in the way?
4. **Analyze:** Sofia's donation paid for a month of two lifeguards' salaries. Captain Alvaro says, "This program matters." Explain three reasons a lifeguard program needs support from the community.
5. **Evaluate:** Captain Alvaro says rescues feel "heavier" when the person is someone they know, like Ms. Lucy. Should a professional's feelings change how they work? Explain.
6. **Create:** Design a thank-you card or a fundraising idea your class could use to support the Guardavidas.rpp

Day 4: Waterfalls & Rocks

1. **Remember:** Who went into the jungle to find the hikers, and what gear did they carry?
2. **Understand:** Carlos says the walk is usually 10 minutes. Why did it take an hour?
3. **Apply:** Clouds are building over a waterfall where you are swimming. Using what Scarlet says about afternoon clouds, what should you do?
4. **Analyze:** The rock that trapped the hiker also slowed her bleeding. How can one thing be both a problem and a help?
5. **Evaluate:** The police called the lifeguards, and the lifeguards called Carlos from Costa Canyoning. Is asking an expert for help a strength or a weakness? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Captain Alvaro tells himself, "Timing matters more than strength." Write your own short phrase to steady yourself in a hard moment, and describe when you would use it.

Day 5: Nature Calls

1. **Remember:** What three rescues happen in this chapter?
2. **Understand:** Lieutenant Abraham says needlefish are attracted to light and reflection. Why does that matter for Paulo's necklace?
3. **Apply:** Before you surf or swim, what would you take off, and why?
4. **Analyze:** Captain Alvaro says, "Some rescues are loud, while others are quiet." Sort the three rescues into loud and quiet, and explain your choices.
5. **Evaluate:** Paulo grabbed the fish and held it tight, and Captain Alvaro called his instincts "perfect." Do you agree? Why?
6. **Create:** The sea turtle was trapped in a plastic six-pack holder. Create a plan for your class to keep plastic out of the ocean.

Day 6: One Team

1. **Remember:** Who were Rosie and Gustavo, and what happened to each of them?
2. **Understand:** What does "Same moment. Different needs." mean?
3. **Apply:** What should you do if you get lost at the beach? Use what Gustavo did right.
4. **Analyze:** Compare how the team spoke to Rosie and how they spoke to Gustavo. Why did they choose different words?

5. **Evaluate:** Ronny had blankets, sugar water and rolled towels ready before the team reached shore. In an emergency, which matters more: speed or preparation? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Write a short guide for families called "If Your Child Gets Lost at the Beach."

Day 7: The Ceremony

1. **Remember:** Which four elements, directions and colors surrounded the bonfire?
2. **Understand:** Why do the lifeguards surf in like pelicans, each taking a turn at the front?
3. **Apply:** Choose one word from the chant (Discipline, Courage, Respect or Service) and describe a time you showed it.
4. **Analyze:** Ronny's scraped gourd sounds like "tiny feet skimming the water's surface." Use the instrument clues to match each lifeguard with a spirit animal.
5. **Evaluate:** The ceremony has no awards and no names shouted. Is a quiet ceremony more meaningful than a loud one? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Design an instrument that would sound like your own spirit animal, and explain your choices.

Bonus chapter: Beyond the Rip

1. **Remember:** What events were part of the lifeguard competition?
2. **Understand:** Why were two young sea lions so far from the Galápagos?
3. **Apply:** Ricardo signed up to be a lifeguard for a day. Which event would challenge you most, and how would you train for it?
4. **Analyze:** How did the pelicans, the scarlets and the lifeguards each play a part in the sea lion rescue?
5. **Evaluate:** Captain Alvaro says that in front of the rip there is no room to think, but beyond the rip there is clarity. Is it always better to step back before acting? Defend your answer.
6. **Create:** Retell one event from the competition from Scarlet's point of view.

Big-idea questions

Use these with any chapter, in small groups or as journal prompts.

1. **Courage:** What does it take to swim toward danger when everyone else is swimming away?
2. **Teamwork:** No lifeguard works alone. When does the crew need each other most?
3. **Respect for the ocean:** What does it mean to respect the sea, not fear it?
4. **Community:** Who keeps your town safe? How can you thank them?
5. **Watching and noticing:** The macaw has watched Costa Ballena for 30 years. What can you learn just by paying close attention?
6. **Your spirit animal:** Which animal shares your strengths? Explain your choice with two examples.
7. **Heroes:** Are lifeguards heroes, or ordinary people doing a job? Can they be both?

Water-safety lessons

These are the safety rules the real Guardavidas teach on Costa Ballena's beaches. Each one also happens in the story, so students can find it in the chapter first, then talk about how to use it in real life.

Rule	What students should know	Where it happens in the story
Swim near a lifeguard tower	Choose a beach and a spot where a guardavida can see you	Day 1: Mariela says "Know before you go": go to beaches where lifeguards are on duty and ask them about rip currents
Never swim alone	Always go with a buddy and tell an adult where you are	Day 1: Yeiner practices in the rip with the whole team holding the rope and Mateo and Paloma waiting on surfboards
Spot a rip current	Look for a calm-looking gap between breaking waves, darker water or foam moving out to sea	Days 1 and 2: Vinicio notices the sandbar shifted overnight; Andrea spots foam pulling out in curved white arrows
If a rip pulls you	Don't fight it. Float, wave for help, and swim parallel to the shore until you are free	Day 1: Yeiner can't swim back to shore, so he floats, then swims to the side until the current disappears

Rule	What students should know	Where it happens in the story
Watch the tides and swells	A red flag means stay out. Some beaches, like Playa Arco, are safe to visit only at low tide	Day 2: the fishermen on the rocks don't notice the rising swell. Day 5: the tide rises fast around the baby sloth's boulder
Leave jewelry on shore	Needlefish are attracted to light and shiny things like necklaces and watches	Day 5: a needlefish strikes Paulo, who was wearing a silver necklace
If you get lost, stay put	Stay in one place and tell a lifeguard or an adult. A rising tide can make the beach look different	Day 6: Gustavo stays in one place with Captain Bubbles, and Paloma finds his mom
Help without going in	Call for a lifeguard, throw something that floats, and call 911. Never swim out to rescue someone yourself	Day 1: the team practices throwing the life buoy. Day 3: the first order is to call 911

Try it: Show a photo of a rip current and ask students to find it before you point it out.

Classroom activities

Each activity takes one class period and needs only paper, colored pencils and the trading cards.

1. **Make your own trading card.** Students draw themselves as a guardavida and fill in the same fields as the real cards: nickname, birthday, favorite food, special skill, spirit animal and a fun fact.
2. **Spirit animal match.** Read a fun fact aloud and have students guess which lifeguard and spirit animal it belongs to.
3. **Design a bracelet.** Using the story's stones (larimar for water, tiger's eye for earth, rose quartz for fire, amethyst for wind, moonstone for the tides, plus a piece of Dominical coral), students draw a bracelet and write which element matters most to them and why.
4. **Map the beaches.** On a blank map of Costa Ballena, students label the beaches from the book and mark which ones have lifeguard towers.

5. **Letter to a lifeguard.** Students write a thank-you note to the Guardavidas, which can be delivered to the towers or mailed to c/o Amy Falk Weinberger, Uvita Info Center, Flor de la Sabana, Uvita de OSA, Costa Rica, 60504
6. **Life cycle of a rescue.** In groups, students draw a four-panel comic: spot, signal, rescue, care.

Cross-curricular connections

Each link starts from a scene students have already read.

Subject	Connection	Where in the book
Science	How the full moon and sun create higher tides	Day 6
Science	Rip currents: up to 5 miles per hour, faster than an Olympic swimmer	Day 1
Science	El Niño and why sea lions from the Galápagos turned up in Costa Ballena	Bonus chapter
Science	Ocean wildlife: needlefish, sea turtles, dolphins, pelicans; plastic pollution	Day 5
Science	Scarlet macaw poaching, deforestation and the nest project in Jacó	About Scarlet
Social studies	Costa Rica's geography and the beaches of Costa Ballena	Part One, map
Social studies	The Bribri and Boruca peoples, the nagual and the cacao ceremony	Days 1 and 7
Social studies	How community donations fund the lifeguard program	Day 3
Math	2024: 3,867 preventions vs. 20 rescues; graph them	Day 1
Math	Compare 2024 (3,867 preventions, 20 rescues) with 2026 (4,185+ preventions, 12 rescues, 16 medical events). What changed, and why might it matter?	Bonus chapter
Math	Speed: a needlefish at 37 miles per hour vs. a rip current at 5	Days 1 and 5

Subject	Connection	Where in the book
Language arts	Narrator's point of view, fact vs. fiction, finding the typo	Both, Day 1
Art and music	Illustrations; instruments that sound like each spirit animal	Day 7
Health and PE	First aid, CPR, run-swim-run fitness	Days 2, 3 and bonus

Assessment ideas

Exit ticket (any session, 3 minutes): one thing I learned, one safety rule I will remember, one question I still have.

Rubric for the Create questions and activities:

Criteria	Beginning	Developing	Proficient
Uses evidence from the book	No details from the story	Some details, loosely connected	Specific scenes or quotes that support the work
Shows safety understanding	Safety idea missing or incorrect	Safety idea present but incomplete	Accurate safety idea a reader could use
Original thinking	Repeats the book	Adds a few new ideas	Brings a clearly new idea or point of view
Clear communication	Hard to follow	Mostly clear	Clear, organized and easy to follow

Bring the Guardavidas to your class

End the book club with a visit, so students can meet the real people behind the characters.

- **Classroom or school visit:** the author and members of the Guardavidas can present the book and a short water-safety lesson. Contact for bookings: to be added.
- **Get the book:** Captain Alvaro & the Guardavidas on Amazon (paperback)

- **Follow along:** @costaballenalifeguards on Instagram
- **In an emergency:** call 911

Answer key

Find the Match and the Day 7 instruments

Lifeguard	Spirit animal	Ceremony instrument
Captain Alvaro	Eagle ray	Ocean drum
Lt. Abraham Jossué Padilla	Jaguar	Large hand drum
Andrea Vanessa Morales	Scarlet macaw	Wooden flute
Yeiner Andreó Araya	River otter	Rhythm sticks
Mariela Olyvia Rivera	Mariola bee	Seed pod rattles
Ronny Miquel Mesen	Basilisk lizard	Scraped gourd
Mateo Austin Tubito	Sea turtle	Hand pan
Vinicio Angelo Gerardo	Pelican	Soaring between sky and sea
Paloma Ozzy Gonzalez	Blue morpho butterfly	Wind chimes
Roy Haley Sanchez	Dolphin	Conch shell horn

Remember questions

These notes represent the questions with only one right answer from the facts in the chapter. These questions set up next question hierarchies. They offer a place for younger readers to succeed first and to prove their answers from within the chapters. It is recommended that the books are used in direct teaching.

- **Part One:** November 25, 1985, in Jacó. Fly high; never accept food from a human hand; fly south.
- **Day 1:** Larimar for water (center stone), tiger's eye for earth, rose quartz for fire, amethyst for wind, moonstone for the shifting tides.
- **Day 2:** A rip current pulling out swimmers and a surfer (Andrea, Yeiner); fishermen on the rocks as the swell rose (Lt. Abraham, Ronny and Bamboo); a family caught knee-deep (Captain Alvaro, Mateo, Vinicio, with Paloma on first aid). Roy called the

ambulance and Mariela moved the crowd back.

- **Day 3:** Sofia, in the first car, was helped by Captain Alvaro. Ms. Lucy, in the second car, was helped by Lt. Abraham and Mariela with a road worker. Mateo moved the crowd; Vinicio and Roy called 911 from the tower.
- **Day 4:** Captain Alvaro, Lt. Abraham and Carlos from Costa Canyoning, with Andrea and Vinicio as the handoff team. Gear: ropes, bungee cords, whistles, flashlights, first aid kits, rain gear, knife tools, walkie-talkies, harnesses, carabiners, helmets and headlamps.
- **Day 5:** Paulo and the needlefish; the baby sloth on the boulder; the sea turtle tangled in a six-pack holder.
- **Day 6:** Rosie, a beginner surfer with a possible spinal injury; Gustavo, a lost boy holding his stuffed monkey, Captain Bubbles.
- **Day 7:** Earth, north, green; air, east, yellow; water, west, blue; fire, south, orange.
- **Bonus:** Run-swim-run, sprints, swimming and treading water, and drone events.